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FISH LIKE TOM BRADY

I don't remember at exactly what moment during the 2017 Super Bowl we all realized what the outcome would be, but at some point in the fourth quarter one of my FLW co-workers, watching in a hotel in Guntersville, Ala., after the final day of the FLW Tour opener, said out loud what everyone was thinking: "He's going to win it."

Of course, if you subscribe to this magazine, then you live on this planet, and consequently you know who "he" is. Tom Brady, the New England Patriots' quarterback, brought his team back from a 25-point third-quarter deficit to beat the Atlanta Falcons and win the biggest sporting event of the year.

The Patriots' comeback included a 91-yard drive in the final minutes, a two-point conversion and an overtime touchdown. It would have been impressive in any football game, but it's already a legendary performance for having happened in the Super Bowl.

Yes, Tom Brady was nearly perfect in those final minutes. But let me tell you, I've seen some equally impressive performances on the FLW Tour. From Scott Suggs dominating the Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Ouachita and winning \$1 million to Greg Hackney dropping 30 on the scale at Pickwick, the bass pros on Tour have found ways to amaze me in all my 10 seasons with FLW.

The most recent performance that stands out occurred about a year ago at the fifth FLW Tour stop of the season on Kentucky Lake. Jason Lambert reminded folks that just owning a couple of big-screen depth finders doesn't make you a ledge master. More pixels don't guarantee you can hang with the big boys.

Lambert set a Kentucky Lake FLW Tour record by catching more than 97 pounds over four days and capped off the win with a 29-pound day-four limit. Stout.

Now, I was out there on day four, following around runner-up Brandon Hunter and a few others in the top 10, and it was one of the most grueling days I've experienced on the water – clear skies, air temperature in the upper 90s, no breeze. My laptop overheated to the point that it wouldn't function. I wanted to crawl under the Ranger console to hide from the sun.

Lambert had already spent three practice days and three competition days in the sweatbox, and he still had to catch fish and hold off a ledge-fishing murderer's row that included Hunter, Mark Rose, Jayme Rampey, Scott Canterbury, Bryan Thrift, Jacob Wheeler, Brad Knight, Terry Bolton and Andy Morgan. So, yeah, it wasn't the Forrest Wood Cup, but there was enough pressure to turn coal into diamonds. Plus Lambert was trying to finally win a major multi-day FLW tournament on the Tennessee River. He'd been close several times before, and no one doubted his ledge skills, but he still hadn't won. He had something to prove.

With all that in play, Lambert closed it out with one of the most impressive ledge-fishing performances of all time, catching 29 pounds by targeting bass that had been pressured so heavily by other anglers that the fish had broken off from the bigger schools. And Lambert absolutely pounded them.

Pardon my string of sports clichés here, but what FLW fans saw was a guy with an opportunity to show out on the biggest stage, in a scenario where he was expected to deliver, and who gave a performance above and beyond what anyone anticipated.

Doesn't that sound a little Tom Bradyish?

It wasn't just Lambert's chops as a ledge fisherman that prompted us to slap his mug on the cover of this issue and run a feature about how he fishes ledges. We wanted to capture the most striking aspect of his success – the fact that we've reached a point where all tournament pros understand the ledge-fishing game, but guys like Lambert still consistently do it better.

So, no, it's not just another article on finding and catching ledge bass. We've published that one about a dozen times. This one's different. It's better – like Lambert.

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FISHING EXPOSED
HARRIS CHAIN OF LAKES — MARCH 12, 2017





BIG WINNER

On lakes flush with big bass, you're never out of contention. Just one big head, like the 8-pounder shown here performing its nothing-but-net leap for Bradley Dortch on day four at the Harris Chain FLW Tour event, can move a guy many places up the leaderboard.

In Dortch's case, the fish contributed to a final-day 22-pound, 2-ounce catch that moved him from fifth place to first. Dortch had just switched from throwing a lipless crankbait to winding a NetBait Big Bopper Worm through a seam between two clumps of hydrilla when the fish bit. It was the big bite he needed to clinch the biggest win of his career.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

SKIPPER, TYSON ARE FIRST WOMEN'S DUO TO QUALIFY FOR COLLEGE CHAMPIONSHIP

Jaci Skipper and Ryleigh Tyson of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) made FLW history in March with a 14th-place finish at the YETI FLW College Fishing Southeastern Division tournament at Lake Hartwell to become the first two-woman team to qualify for the National Championship.

Skipper, of Dothan, Ala., and Tyson, of Saint Cloud, Fla., both freshmen, are members of SCAD's varsity women's fishing team. The school also fields a varsity men's team and a club-level fishing team. Skipper and Tyson will fish the 2018 championship tournament.

Chico State angler Allison Shaw, fishing with partner Thomas White, was the first woman to fish the YETI FLW College Fishing National Championship in 2011.



FLW REACHES 500K LIKES ON FACEBOOK

Sometime in March, FLW reached 500,000 likes on its Facebook page. To all who follow along via social media, FLWFishing.com and *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine, we say thank you.

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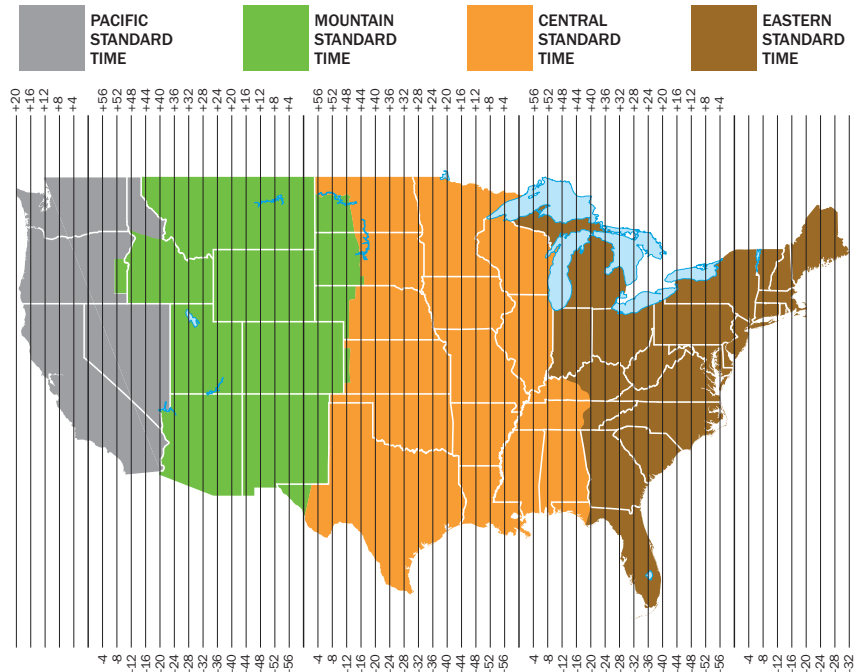
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SOLUNAR TABLES

MAY-JUNE 2017



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

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

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Timing and Rotation



In the chronicles of professional bass fishing jargon, the term “timing” has recently become popular, just as the term “junk-fishing” became a cool buzzword several years ago.

In some tournaments, pros reference timing, or “timing and rotation,” so much that one begins to wonder whether they are bass fishing, square dancing or jumping rope.

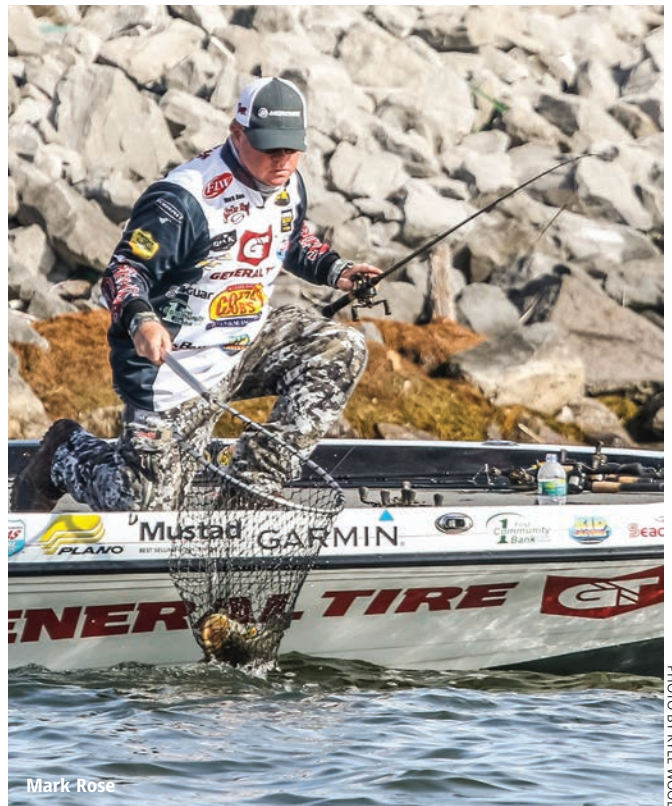
In all fairness, the notion of timing is real, but the term gets overused, and its meaning can be confusing because there are several types of timing involved in tournament fishing. Understanding these concepts can help fishing fans make better sense of how a pro is catching fish when he attributes his success to timing, and possibly help them understand how to catch more bass, too.

The Milk Run

One type of timing and rotation involves fishing a “milk run” of productive spots and running them in the correct order so that each spot gets the right amount of time to “rest” and replenish based on its size.

This type of timing is simplest when an angler has the spots all to himself and only has to compensate for his own fishing pressure. The milk run doesn't have to include many spots, either. This was illustrated perfectly by pros Mark Rose and Bryan Thrift when they took the top two spots at the 2017 FLW Tour opener on Lake Gunterville.

Rose found a primary staging area that produced a lot of his fish, but the area was somewhat small. He could fish it all



Mark Rose

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

in about 35 minutes, which wasn't enough time to let fish set back up on the key targets. So he killed time by fishing riprap on a bridge causeway while waiting for his primary area to get primed again.

The causeway was a perfect waiting area because it also produced some decent fish for Rose during the week. He developed perfect timing and rotation between the causeway and the staging spot as he bounced back and forth between them.

Similarly, Thrift located bass near a hole in some eelgrass on a flat. Once he caught three or four fish from the spot, he needed to let the area replenish. Thrift fished a series of nearby marina docks where he could keep a watchful eye on the flat while scoring a few bonus keepers.

In each situation, the pro could dictate his own timing and rotation on the spot because he was the only one fishing it.

Dealing with Pressure

Where things get tricky is when other anglers apply pressure, too. This is more common in a ledge-fishing scenario at a fishery such as Kentucky Lake, where the location of productive ledges is common knowledge and "getting in line" to fish them is standard operating procedure.

In this scenario, it's imperative to know how much pressure each ledge spot can take and how long it takes for schools to re-form. This usually involves patrolling a series of spots and keeping close tabs on who is on them and for how long.



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH

The trick is to identify lulls in the pressure and to show up during those lulls. If you get lucky enough to hit a series of hot spots during the lulls, you have succeeded in finding good timing and rotation.

Conversely, if you show up at spots when other anglers are there, it's considered bad timing and rotation, and can ruin your day. Thrift is a master at this sort of timing game, lining himself up to fish the lulls instead of the crowds.

Mother Nature's Timing

Timing and rotation are not always dictated by fishing pressure alone. Fishery and weather condition windows also bring timing into focus. Tides, current generation, sunshine,



PHOTO BY JOE HOLLAND

wind and warming trends all create such windows, and syncing up with the right conditions can be the difference between success and failure.

On tidal fisheries such as the Potomac River, James River and California Delta, the natural rise and fall of water is obviously a big deal. A spot might be neutral all day long and then suddenly get really hot for about an hour during the right tide.

It's the same with current in rivers and some reservoirs. A particular ledge can be fruitless for most of the day until a few gates in the dam are thrown open, then it suddenly becomes a hot spot.

Sunshine can be a trigger for everything from locking fish on beds to positioning bass in shade. For instance, a row of good docks might not be productive first thing in the morning when the entire bank is shaded. Once the sun moves off the tree line and the shade tightens up under the docks, however, the fish become a lot easier to target. An angler might key on this timing and show up just as the dock bite gets good.

Lake Okeechobee is notorious for this type of conditional timing. An area that's cold and turbid one day can produce winning fish a day or two later once clarity has improved and the sun has warmed the waters.

Indeed, the best pros in the business have a keen sense of these types of timing. Andy Morgan, David Dudley and Wesley Strader are so impressive because they put so much trust in timing. They can quickly fish through an area that is fishless at the time, but recognize the right ingredients needed to activate the bite there. After everyone else has written it off, they come back days or even hours later to catch a big bag when the right ingredients have come together to fire up the spot.

This sense of timing results from a combination of intuition and experience. Having fished many lakes across the country at many different times, these pros have an acute sense of when "something is getting right" somewhere else, and when to make that move. When they go to weigh-in with yet another eye-popping limit while others have struggled, they say, "Today was really all about timing."

And to some degree, they're exactly right. ■



**COLIN
MOORE**

Larry Nixon: 40 Years and Counting

Humble beginnings were no hurdle for this Arkansas pro's big-time accomplishments



What you see is what you get in Bee Branch, Ark.: nothing fancy, but sufficient. Along U.S. Route 65, the north-south main drag, the stores and services that a town of 2,000 needs to survive are pretty much it.

It's small-town America and all that implies: flyover red state, dinner on the grounds, a convenience store or two, and South Side High School. As is true of most farming communities, it's where important things begin and sometimes end, a place where hard work is a common denominator, a springboard that hones and prepares aspirants to go for it – whatever "it" is. Life doesn't give much slack here, yet if you could make a living in Bee Branch, and your family was there, why in the world would you want to live anywhere else?

Larry Nixon could never find a good reason to stay away. For most of his life, the Arkansas pro has lived in or around Bee Branch, where his parents raised three sons and two daughters. There, nestled in the foothills of the southern Ozarks, he learned everything needed to

jump-start a career in tournament fishing that has spanned 40 years. His vocational school was nearby Greers Ferry Lake, where, beginning at 16, he started guiding for \$10 a day out of his preacher father Lester's Ranger. Among his chief mentors were Glen Andrews, Lou Medlock and Glenn Cossey – storied masters of the White River chain of lakes who also guided in a circuit that included Beaver Lake, Bull Shoals, Greers Ferry, Toledo Bend and Sam Rayburn.

When he started taking his guide business on the road in the early '70s, Nixon eventually hooked up with Tommy Martin, a Toledo Bend guide who became one of his best friends. By that time, Nixon had already notched one impressive showing in a major tournament, scoring third place in the 1968 Arkansas Bass Championship (24-year-old Ricky Green won it) when he was 18. It never occurred to Nixon to pursue a career in tournament fishing until Martin convinced him that the stringers he and his customers were hauling out of Toledo Bend proved he had the right stuff.

Nixon's first national tournament came in 1977 on the St. Johns River. He finished 19th and won back his \$600 entry fee plus some traveling money. He skipped the next tournament, at Toledo Bend, because he figured he would stand to lose more in guide earnings than he would make in prize money. His career began in earnest then. Five years and several tournaments later, Nixon cracked the \$100,000 barrier in winnings to become one of only a few in those days to have done so.

In those years he figured in some epic battles with the likes of Rick Clunn, Hank Parker, Roland Martin and Guido Hibdon. He also developed a reputation for loyalty to his sponsors and to his fans, and in due time became a superstar in the tournament game. In 2001, Nixon, Clunn and Martin became the first active tournament fishermen to be inducted into the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame. That inaugural class also included Forrest Wood, Bobby Murray, Homer Circle, Ray Scott and Bill Dance,



which pretty much made a statement about Nixon's prominence in the sport.

As a moneymaker, Nixon's uncanny performances in a string of B.A.S.S. Megabucks tournaments set him apart. In 1988 he won \$109,000 on the Harris Chain of Lakes, then topped the 1990 field on the Harris Chain to collect another \$108,788. In 1990, another first-place finish on Lake Guntersville earned him \$76,304. In the years when winning the Classic earned a pro \$50,000, Nixon managed to show out in other events where bigger payouts were on the line.

Somewhere along the way, Bee Branch pulled Nixon back for good – and as a millionaire. In 1992, he reached the million-dollar mark in career earnings, becoming the first tournament fisherman to do so. A few years later, Irwin Jacobs introduced FLW to the bass fishing world, and another venue opened up for Nixon and other pros.

Around the turn of the new century, anglers such as Nixon who fished both circuits were forced by circumstances and scheduling conflicts to choose between the two. In 2006, Nixon fished his last B.A.S.S. event, the



Bassmaster Classic on Lake Toho, where he placed 10th.

His rationale for choosing to stay with FLW was typically Nixonian, plain and simple: "I liked the people who ran things at FLW, and I loved the way they ran things. Also, it got to where I felt comfortable fishing just eight or nine tournaments a year. I liked most of the places where FLW was setting up their events, so that's the way I went."

Staying put paid off for the 66-year-old Nixon. He fished his very first FLW Tour event in 1998, and now he's closing in on \$1,800,000 in prize money. Add that to the \$1,634,858 he earned in B.A.S.S. events from 1977 to 2006, and Nixon is approaching nearly \$3.5 million in winnings. Quadruple bypass surgery last year notwithstanding, he's still going strong, and plans to continue as long as his health and his enthusiasm for tournament fishing last.

Not bad for a boy from Bee Branch, Ark., who proved that it's not the size of the community he grows up in that determines a person's lot in life, but rather his own will to succeed with the skills he's given. ■



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TECHNIQUES | SCIENCE | PEOPLE | FACTS | ADVICE

TAKEOFF



WHAT'S INSIDE:

3 pros' favorite big-fish baits

Have you heard of the butt worm?

Learn about late spawns

Pumpkinseed patterns for giant shallow bass

BRYAN THRIFT'S 20 GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

How Stephen Patek is chasing his dreams in Texas

Boat rigging advice for offshore fishing



Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

Slow Down to Beat the Postspawn Blues

The postspawn period has its challenges. Bass disperse from spawning flats – areas of predictable congregation – to nondescript expanses for rest and recuperation prior to summer. Intercepting bass this time of year isn't always easy.

FLW Tour rookie and 2016 T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American champ Jeremy Lawyer takes the seasonal movement in stride. He focuses on key spots along well-defined migration routes, such as primary creek channels leading to the main lake.

"I like to concentrate at the mouths of major creeks, specifically the intermediate bars or flats adjacent to deep water," he says. "I usually find them in the 12- to 17-foot range where there's an abundance of bait."

Lawyer relies on three baits: a 1/2- or 3/4-ounce JaKKed Baits Football Jig, a white 1/2-ounce Freedom Tackle Hydra Shad Hair Jig, and a Zoom Magnum Trick Worm rigged on a 3/8- to 1/2-ounce stand-up jighead.

"I'll often see groups of fish on my Lowrance. If they don't bite at first, I'll switch colors," Lawyer adds. "Subtle changes like that make a huge difference when the fish are worn down. But, the main key is to really slow down."



PHOTO BY COLIN MOORE

TOP BAIT FOR A BIG BITE:



1. Brandon Cobb 1/2-ounce "Sparkie" Jig

"Being a crawfish imitator, it's a big-fish bait whether you're throwing it in 3 inches or 30 feet of water. You can flip it to shallow cover or drag it on deep ledges. If fishing shallow, I tip it with a Zoom Super Chunk. If deep, I like a twin-tail grub."



2. Clark Wendlandt Strike King 5 1/2-inch Shadacious

"If you are looking for just one big bite, a swimbait is tough to beat anytime of year. I fish it on an open jighead, adjusting weight – 1/4 to 1 ounce – depending on the depth of the water."

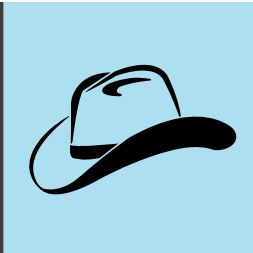


3. Todd Auten White 3/8-ounce Zorro Buzzbait with Zoom Horny Toad

"Individually, they [the buzzbait and Horny Toad] are big-fish baits. Together, they are even more deadly in warm water. Slipping the Horny Toad over the head of the buzzbait gives it a unique look and sound." ■

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ...

... to Ranger Boats founder Forrest L. Wood, who turns 85 on June 9. Wood started building boats in 1968, fulfilling a total of six orders that first year. Today he is still going strong, attending FLW tournaments, and his name and influence on modern-day bass fishing are celebrated worldwide.



Overcoming Algae

Algae can be a troublesome obstacle in some regions of the country when, seemingly overnight, gin-clear water transforms into hideous green slop, causing fish to head for cleaner confines. Or do they? Canadian FLW Tour pro Cory Johnston thinks not, and advises anglers not to overreact when confronted with the seasonal bloom.

"While algae can be somewhat nasty to fish in, people often panic and immediately conclude the fish are gone," he says. "The rock piles don't change. The weedlines don't change. The fish don't move out. You have to change tactics, like throwing a ChatterBait instead of a drop-shot."

Johnston favors baits that are easy to locate and track off the bottom, such as jerkbaits, swimbaits, spinnerbaits and the aforementioned ChatterBait.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

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EVINRUDE





FISHING THE "BUTT WORM"

DENNIS TIETJE'S ODDLY NAMED WORM RIG SKIRTS THE LINE BETWEEN FINESSE AND POWER

By Joe Sills

Dennis Tietje has carried an unusual box of tackle with him from Florida to Canada, east-to-west and everywhere in between. It's a box that he christened in his home state of Louisiana, where years ago he discovered a bizarre technique for finesse fishing on Toledo Bend. Now, we've talked the veteran pro into opening it up.

"My box is labeled 'butt worms,'" Tietje says. "It's full of finesse worms."

Before you laugh, consider this: When bass are shallow before, during and after the spawn, persistent bass heads might be looking for a different strategy to entice big fish that have seen their fair share of lures over the spawning period. If you're fishing a popular waterway, chances are the fish you target in shallow spawning areas already have reviewed – and maybe fallen for – an armada of stick baits and jigs and topwater noisemakers and old-fashioned worms. What they've likely never seen before is the presentation that makes Tietje chuckle almost every time he talks about it.

"I don't know how that term came about," he says, "but it works."

Tietje makes the rig by sliding a lead nail weight into the tail of a 6 1/2-inch Strike King Perfect Plastics Finesse Worm. Tietje pairs the weight with a 3/0 Trokar TK120 Plastic Worm Hook rigged Texas style in the opposite end. From there, he

usually ties the bait to 10-pound-test (14-pound-test if the water clarity accommodates it) Sunline Super FC Sniper fluorocarbon on a 7-foot, medium-heavy Denali casting rod with a Bass Pro Shops Pro Qualifier (5.3:1) baitcasting reel.

Cut the nail weight to whichever size works for the depth of water and cover being fished.

How to Fish It

Cast and retrieve. That's it; no fancy presentation, though it will be necessary to vary the speed of retrieve to determine what the bass want. If grass is already growing, cast toward holes in the grass and work the bait over the top. Tietje says the butt worm is mostly weedless and excels in cover. Fish it just below the surface or deeper as conditions allow, in much the same way a floating worm is fished.

"With a normal Texas rig, you'll be fighting the grass the entire time," he says. "By putting the weight in the tail, it does two things: It allows you to fish that worm subtly, without disturbing the grass, and it keeps the front of the worm high because there's no weight in there. That keeps the grass off of it."

"Basically, it looks like a snake. You can kind of slither it through those grass beds, and you're not pulling grass as you're fishing. Fish are kind of timid this time of year. They've been beaten to death by boat after boat after boat. You're almost power-finesse fishing them. You don't see a snake swimming through the grass with 2 pounds of grass behind it. This lure is the same way."

Expanding on the Technique

Tietje admits that the butt worm is not his creation. The crawfish farmer learned the technique years ago as a local tournament angler at Toledo Bend. Over the years he has adopted tweaks to the lure's retrieve that have served him well when more popular finesse strategies have failed.

"Sometimes, when you're working that bait fast and you get a bass chasing it, you can stop your retrieve and the weight will carry that bait backward in the water," he says. "Then you have to drop your rod and trust the bait. That fish has either got to run into it or eat it, and a lot of times that triggers a bite."

If grass is lacking, Tietje says the butt worm can still be deployed in open water, or especially around docks, where the weighted tail can propel the worm under a dock after a well-placed cast.

"It casts better than a typical Texas rig," he notes. "But the big bonuses here are its ability to slither and the unique way the weighted tail makes it fall."

"It's not a new trick, but it is overlooked," Tietje adds. "The butt worm is really effective when fish are looking for something different." ■

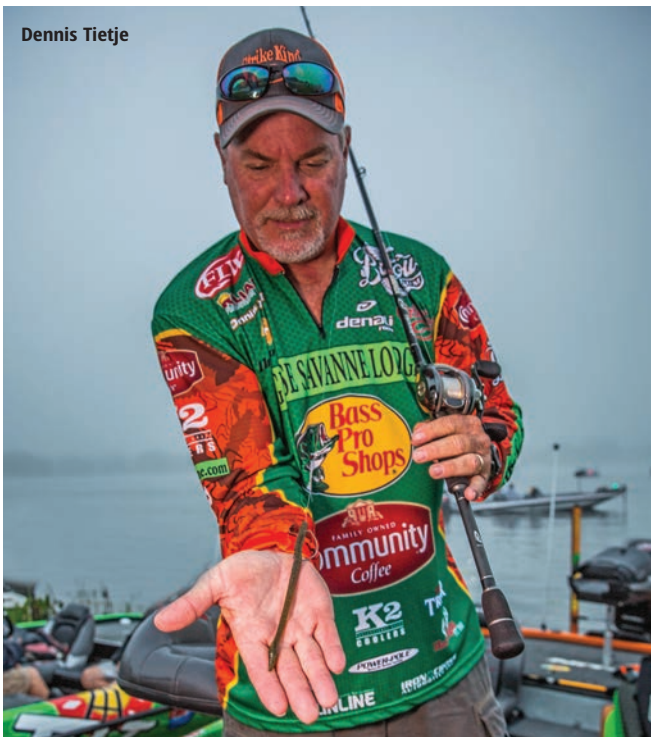


PHOTO BY D.W. REED II

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THE SPAWN CONTINUUM

CLIMATE AND OTHER FACTORS DETERMINE THE TIMING AND DURATION OF THE SPAWN

By TJ Maglio

For most bass anglers, the spawn is thought of as a single event, and it's defined by what they experience on their local waters. However, when the spawn starts and how long it lasts vary greatly depending on where you are in the country.

While studying spawning bass from Florida to Ontario, Dr. Cory Suski, associate professor of environmental biology at the University of Illinois, has seen these differences firsthand on the water.

"The length of day, weather patterns and water conditions vary dramatically across the bass's home range," he says. "It only makes sense that the spawn would also change significantly as you travel through the bass's range."

Suski's research has provided valuable insight into how, why and when bass spawn in different parts of the country. Figuring out where you are in that continuum can be step one in understanding and using that knowledge to catch more bass.

When it Starts

In the far northern reaches of bass country, the spawn doesn't kick off until mid-to-late June, and you can occasionally see fish locked on beds well into July.

Duration of Spawn

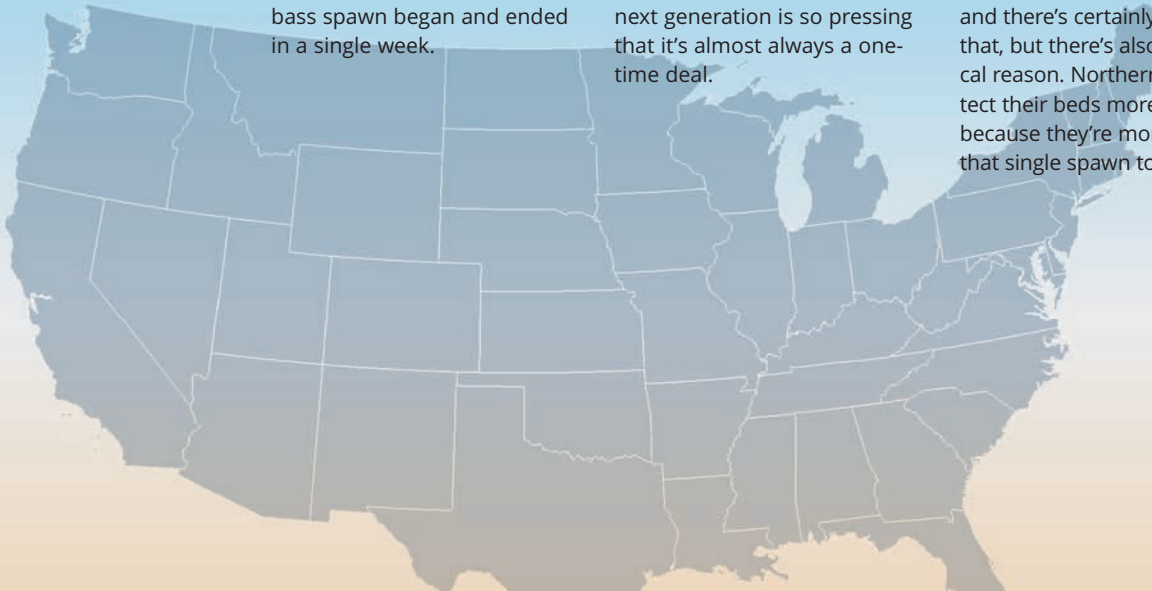
In the North the growing season is so short that when conditions become favorable, bass all head to the bank at once. Suski has studied lakes in Ontario where the entire bass spawn began and ended in a single week.

Multiple Spawns?

In the northern portions of their range, bass are less likely to spawn multiple times, opting instead for single, more comprehensive spawning events. The urge to launch the next generation is so pressing that it's almost always a one-time deal.

Parental Care

If you have fished for bedding bass both north and south, you've probably noticed that Northern spawners are easier to catch. This is often credited to lack of pressure, and there's certainly truth to that, but there's also a biological reason. Northern bass protect their beds more vigorously because they're more reliant on that single spawn to reproduce.



In the extreme southern edge of the bass's range, places such as Florida and south Texas, spawning bass are commonly detected as early as December, because the water temperatures in those regions seldom drop below 60 degrees.

Because water conditions are favorable for egg incubation much of the winter, bass in the South potentially can spawn anytime from roughly Christmas to St. Patrick's Day. This is why most places in the South will see waves of spawners over a period of several months.

Due to a longer spawning season, Southern anglers are also more likely to see "second spawns" or multiple spawning events from individual bass. A female bass might enter a nest, drop eggs, then leave and return two weeks later if she's still carrying eggs and the conditions become favorable again.

A big, mature female largemouth sitting on a bed down south can be downright finicky. From a biological perspective, that's because they are much less invested in that particular spawning event. The fish will have other opportunities to spawn. ■

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PATTERNING PUMPKINSEEDS

WHEN BASS KEY ON PUMPKINSEED SUNFISH AND OTHER BREAM, THE SHALLOW SUMMER BITE CAN BE RED-HOT

By Curtis Niedermier

Targeting bream-eating bass with a topwater is nothing new to Southern bass anglers, but not everyone is skillful at identifying where and when the bite is best or fully capitalizing on the pattern.

Georgia pro Clayton Batts has the bream pattern – more specifically, the pumpkinseed sunfish pattern – pretty well dialed in from the time the bass leave the beds until summer ends, and his system produces mega-stringers every year.

groups, in the shade and under docks,” Batts says. “The bass will stay up there and ambush them in the same places.”

Still-Water Lakes

Batts uses this technique frequently on Lake Sinclair and Lake Oconee, which are both reservoirs on the Oconee River, and Lake Tobesofkee, another reservoir about an hour from Sinclair. None has much current flow, which Batts credits for the summer-long shallow bite.



Clayton Batts

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



TODD PEARSONS/ENGBRETON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

When it Starts

Depending on the water temperature and other environmental factors, the bream bite can kick in anywhere from late April to early May in Batts' region. Usually, after the biggest wave of bass leaves the beds, the threadfin shad will spawn and then bream will follow, with some overlap.

Batts says pumpkinseeds are more reliable in his area lakes than other types of bream because they “steadily spawn” in waves throughout the warm months and then stick around.

“They don't just spawn and go out to deep water. They'll hang around in little

“It can be 110 degrees out there and they'll still be in shallow water,” he says of the bass in those three lakes. “With lakes with current, such as Eufaula and Kentucky Lake, the main factor that I've noticed is that the thermocline goes deep. The fish can live deeper, and the fish will get out. Here on Oconee and Sinclair, and on Tobesofkee, they don't move as much water, and the thermocline gets so severe that they can't get out there deep. On your electronics, once you get in 12 feet of water, it's nothing but static. You can't even see through it.”

Target Areas

Find areas with these three key features, and you'll find pumpkinseeds and other bream either spawning or feeding.

1. Sandy bottoms – Sand is best, but if a lake doesn't have much sand or is more of a rock lake, Batts says to look in the flattest pockets.

2. Small cuts – “I don't necessarily like the backs of pockets. They [bass and bream] have to come so far from the main lake to get there,” says Batts. “Little jut-ins off the main lake that have sand on them are best.”

3. Shallow water – “I like it shallow, like 2 feet or a foot, but I'd probably say a foot to 3 is the range.”

Key Baits, Key Targets

According to Batts, the pumpkinseed pattern doesn't produce tremendous numbers of bass, but it produces mammoth limits. To catch them, the most important strategy is to cover miles of good-looking water.

“You don't want to keep casting to one place,” he says. “You want to have the trolling motor on 40 and keep moving.”



PH Custom Lures Squeaky P

Brian's Bees Prop Bee

Strikezone Lure Co. Pro Series Popp'n Frog

Batts targets his casts at shade lines created by overhanging trees and docks – particularly dock walkways. His go-to lures are a Strikezone Lure Co. Pro Series Popp'n Frog and a prop bait that, like all good prop baits, was custom-made by “a guy” in Appalachia. He says the Brian's Bees Prop Bee and PH Custom Lures Squeaky P are equally good and available to consumers who don't have a connection to a custom lure maker.

“I use a bluegill pattern,” he says about the prop bait. “On my best ones the bottom colors on them are either yellow, which matches a pumpkinseed, or tangerine orange. I'm ripping it and fishing it pretty slow for, like, the first 4 or 5 feet in ‘the juice.’ I throw it behind the dock, fish it a few feet and reel it in. In the shade, I work it all the way out through the shade line and then reel it in.”

The frog works in the same areas, but Batts says it has a lower strike-to-hook-up ratio, so he tends to reserve it for skipping under overhanging tree limbs and docks or for working shoreline grasses, where the prop bait's treble hooks would snag. He likes the popping frog over a regular hollow frog because it can be worked side-to-side without moving forward quite so far with each twitch.

Tournament Strategy

As mentioned, the key to this technique is to cover water. In a tournament situation, that means fishing as efficiently as possible.

On docks, for example, Batts doesn't worry about fishing every corner if he knows the bass are hunting bream under walkway shade around the banks.

“When they get up under those docks it takes so long to fish them, but if I know they're on the walkway pattern I don't even mess with the rest of the dock. If I put it back there [under the walkway], I know I'm putting it on one that's about to chew.”

Likewise, he doesn't often re-fish water unless a group of fish shows itself by following a topwater to the

boat. Generally, he moves quickly from one pocket to the next.

“If a bass is up in a foot of water and it's 100 outside, it's up there to feed. You're just trying to come across enough of them in a day. Covering water and having the confidence to do it all day; that's the key. You can go out deep here [the Oconee system] and catch 50 fish, but they're 12- or 13-inchers, and you won't do any good [in a tournament]. You can throw that frog and prop bait, and you might get five to eight bites a day, but they're the right ones.” ■

WATER CLARITY FACTORS

According to Batts, the minimum water clarity requirement for catching bass on a frog or prop bait while running a bream pattern is about 3 or 4 feet of visibility.

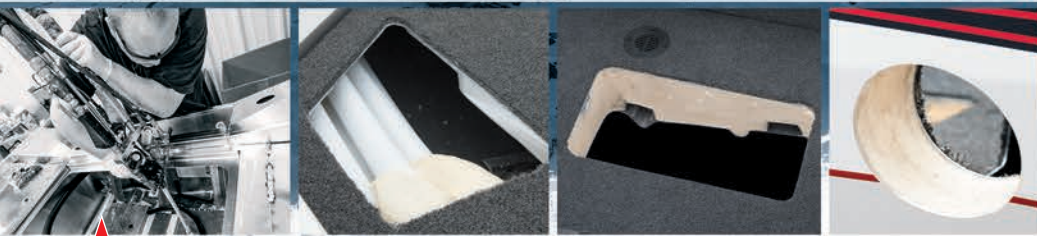
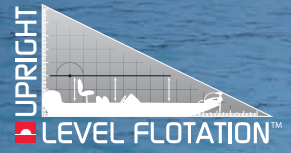
“If it's dirty I throw a 1/4-ounce buzzbait that makes a little more noise. That, or I flip a Big Bite Baits Fighting Frog. I kind of get away from the topwater deal.”

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BRYAN THRIFT'S GREATEST HITS

AT A COUPLE MONTHS SHY OF 38 YEARS OLD AND ONLY IN HIS 11TH SEASON ON TOUR, THE SHELBY, N.C., PRO HAS ALREADY PRODUCED HALL-OF-FAME-WORTHY RESULTS. WE COMPILED SOME OF HIS MOST IMPRESSIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS.



By Curtis Niedermier

1. BACK-TO-BACK CO-ANGLER WINS

Fishing as a co-angler in the Costa FLW Series Southeastern Division in 2005, Thrift won back-to-back tournaments at Santee Cooper and Lake Eufaula.

2. PRO WIN NO. 1

The following season, Thrift earned pro win No. 1 at the Costa FLW Series Southeastern Division opener at Lake Okeechobee.

3. TOUR TOP 10 NO. 1

Thrift finished runner-up in his first-ever FLW Tour event as a pro at Lake Travis in 2007.

4. CUP TOP 10 NO. 1

In addition to making the top 10 at the 2007 opener, Thrift added another regular-season top 10 at Lake Norman en route to finishing 28th in the standings and making the Forrest Wood Cup, where he finished fifth in his Cup debut.

5. THE ROY

Thrift won the Rookie of the Year award in 2007.

6. AOY TOP 10s AND 20s

Thrift's 28th-place AOY finish in his rookie season is the lowest of his career. He followed it up with a string of eight consecutive top-10 AOY finishes before winding up 19th in 2016.

7. AOY AND A WIN IN 2010

The 2010 season was a memorable one for Thrift for the good and the bad. His father, Tommy, passed away that year. Despite the heartbreak, Thrift got his first Tour win at Lake Norman, his home lake, and earned the Angler of the Year title.

8. NINE WINS

Thrift has won nine times with FLW – twice as a co-angler in Costa FLW Series competition and seven times as a pro. Pro wins include two in the Costa FLW Series and five on the FLW Tour.

9. TOP 6 IN TOUR-LEVEL WINS

With five tour-level wins, Thrift is sixth all time behind Scott Martin (8), Brent Ehrler (7), David Dudley (6), David Fritts (6) and Mark Rose (6).

10. TOP 10 IN TOP 10s

With 52 FLW top-10 finishes – 48 as a boater, four as a co-angler – Thrift ranks eighth all-time. He has fished 127 FLW tournaments as a boater, meaning he's finished in the top 10 about 38 percent of the time.

11. AVOIDING THE CELLAR

Bombs are rare for Thrift. In 63 regular-season FLW Tour Major events, he has only finished worse than 100th place four times.



12. THIRD IN TOUR-LEVEL TOP 10s

Thrift has the third most top 10s in tour-level competition with 35. He trails Andy Morgan (37) and Clark Wendlandt (36). Tour-level events include FLW Tour Majors, Opens and Invitationals, FLW Series Eastern and Western division events, Ranger M1 Millennials, and Forrest Wood Cups.

13. THE CUP STREAK

Thrift hasn't missed the Forrest Wood Cup since joining the Tour in 2007. In his 10 appearances, he's never finished worse than 29th, has made the top 10 eight times and has four top-five finishes. He hasn't won it.

14. THE TOP-10 STREAK

Thrift set an FLW Tour record for consecutive top-10 finishes earlier this season. The record is five and includes the 2016 Cup, 2016 FLW Tour Invitational at Lake Norman (which he won) and the first three 2017 Tour events. Thrift logged four non-consecutive top-10 finishes in Tour competition in 2013, 2015 and 2016.

15. A FREQUENT RUNNER-UP

Thrift earned three consecutive runner-up finishes in 2017 at the Tour event at Lake Gunterville, the Tour event at Lake Travis and the Costa FLW Series event at Lake Seminole. He has five previous second-place finishes with FLW, including going back-to-back at Lake Eufaula and Grand Lake Tour events in 2013.

16. \$2 MILLION

Thrift became the seventh pro to reach the \$2 million earnings mark with FLW when he finished runner-up at the Lake Seminole Costa FLW Series event back in March. For reference, he reached the \$1 million mark with his third-place finish at the 2012 Forrest Wood Cup.

17. 7 TOP 10s IN 2010

In 2010, Thrift earned seven top-10 finishes in FLW Tour and FLW Series Eastern Division events combined – the most in one season in his career.

18. THE 2012 SEASON

In 2012, Thrift finished seventh in the Tour's AOY standings, third at the Cup, had the fifth-best season among pros in the FLW Tour Opens (there was no official AOY award for Opens), earned two Tour top 10s and won the Texas Bass Classic.

19. COMEBACKS

Six of Thrift's seven pro wins have come via final-day comeback. The list of pros he's upset: Scott Canterbury, Bradley Dortch, Troy Morrow, Mark Rose, Ron Shuffield and Jimmy McMillan.

20. IN THE MONEY

In 127 FLW tournaments fished as a boater – across all circuits – Thrift has finished in the money 102 times. That's 80 percent of the time. ■

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STEPHEN PATEK IS GETTING HIS ACT TOGETHER

THOUGH HE'S HAD HIS SHARE OF FALSE STARTS, THIS CALIFORNIAN-TURNED-TEXAN'S ABILITY TO FIND AND CATCH BASS MARKS HIM AS A PRO TO WATCH

By Colin Moore
PHOTOS BY JEREMIAH STANLEY

Three years into his FLW Tour career, and Stephen Patek is still learning hard lessons. The latest came at Lake Travis in February, where he was in the lead going into the third day. Then he returned to the weigh-in late and was docked 5 pounds. On day four, a bit rattled and with his spots milked out, he blanked and wound up in 10th place.

Welcome to the tournament-fishing school of hard knocks. Even the best pros have graduated from this same institution of higher learning, some taking less time than others to earn their degrees. How fast Patek learns from his mistakes remains to be seen, but he's smart enough to know that he and nobody else made them, and he doesn't plan to make the same ones again.

Cut Patek some slack. Though he now lives in Garland, Texas, the 30-year-old is from San Diego and was never immersed in the same sort of 24/7 tournament culture that dominates in the Lone Star State and the Southeast. When he was a kid, he fished some with his dad, Chris, but mainly was more interested in playing guitar in a metal band and pitching for a local baseball team.

He still plays guitar, more to unwind after a Tour event than anything else, and even pitches for his old adult league team when it visits Las Vegas for a tournament each summer. But a few country music chords are

starting to sneak into his guitar repertoire, and he's finding that he's eating more barbecued brisket than he used to. Texas is slowly seeping into Stephen Patek.

An interest in tournament fishing now underlies everything. The seeds were planted by Stephen's dad, an avid angler who mainly confines his tournament activity to events in his home state.

"There are a lot of lakes around the San Diego area, and dad and I fished all of them pretty regularly – dad still does, of course," says Stephen. "I also fished team tournaments and club tournaments with Southland Bass Club. My dad and I won three team tournaments out

there. Somewhere along the way I decided that I wanted to make a career in bass fishing, and tournaments were the way I wanted to go about it."

Learning The Shallow Game

Patek moved to Texas to be closer to the heartland of bass tournaments, and Garland was the best choice for him because he has family there. Soon after his arrival, he quickly discovered that nearby Lake Ray Hubbard didn't appeal to him as much as Lake Ray Roberts, about an hour's drive away. Patek says the bass population in the latter isn't great, though it harbors some big fish. Besides, Patek figured that

mastering the tougher bite at Ray Roberts would help with his bass-fishing education.

"The first time I went up there [Ray Roberts] it was kind of overwhelming because of all the standing timber," he says. "It presented a big challenge to me, but I like challenges. The more I fished it, the better I got."

Ray Roberts and other Texas lakes have filled in some of the blanks in Patek's shallow-water resume. Otherwise, he's a fairly well-rounded angler, as fishing clear California lakes such as Otay, Miramar and San Vicente have helped Patek hone deep-water fishing skills that will come in handy on Tennessee River and Ozark lakes. In particular, he admires



A former guitarist in a metal band, Patek says his tastes have changed a bit since moving to Texas to pursue fishing.



Andy Morgan and Bryan Thrift for their consistency, and is trying to pattern his career after theirs. He's already demonstrated his ability to locate offshore fish with Lowrance electronics and then catch them – preferably using a Carolina rig baited with a Zoom Ultra Vibe Speed Craw in green pumpkin. His knack for figuring out bass has translated into \$78,688 in 16 Tour events, or average winnings of \$4,918 per tournament – hardly the track record of the typical novice.

Dealing With Hits and Misses

Except for a little bit of seed money he saved while working as a building materials salesman for a California company, and

help from his family, Patek is going it alone now. His only sponsor is Phenix Rods, which helps him out with tackle. He competes out of a 2011 model Ranger Z521 and pays for his own travel expenses and tackle, looking ahead and waiting for his big break to come along, hopefully sooner rather than later.

Prior to this year, Patek's best finish came in 2016 at Pickwick Lake, where he finished ninth. His season overall last year was a reasonably decent one as he collected checks in every event except Hartwell and Champlain, where he bombed. In fact, his 156th-place finish at Champlain offers a good example of what befalls many rookies who are just starting out and have limited experience on various lakes.

"In practice I got on a terrific frog bite near Fort Ticonderoga, but then a front came through and it really screwed up the fishing," notes Patek. "After day one I was near last place with three fish and 5 1/2 pounds. I got 15 pounds the second day, but the damage was already done."

Although Patek didn't have a Plan B for a lake he'd never fished before, he at least was adaptable enough to know that smallmouths were spawning elsewhere and scratched out a solid limit. He finished the year in 44th place overall, and the fact that the Champlain fiasco probably cost him a berth in the Forrest Wood Cup still rankles.

Learning From Adversity

Disappointment fuels his determination, but Patek knows he's got to stop making the unforced errors that cost him precious points toward qualifying for this year's Cup. For instance, in the Lake Travis tournament Patek's shot at placing higher was ruined because he underestimated how long it would take to get back to the weigh-in site.

"I came in four minutes late – completely unnecessary," he says. "I made a huge mistake

and completely forgot about all the boat traffic that would slow me down. My thought process was that I had one little Guadalupe bass I needed to cull, so I gave myself only 35 minutes to get back from where I was in the Pedernales River [arm]. But there were some big boats between there and take-off, and I had to back way off.

"When I saw that I only had a few minutes left and I still had a long way to go, I thought 'uh-oh, I'm not going to make it.' My proudest moment in a tournament up to that point was leading after two days. Maybe I wouldn't have won it anyway, but to screw up like that – I guarantee it won't happen to me again because of a mental mistake."

Perhaps not, but there are other pitfalls waiting, and Patek will trip over his fair share of them as he matures. His short tournament record reflects that he has a knack for finding bass and then catching them, even on fisheries that are unfamiliar to him, which is to say just about everywhere.

As was the case for many aspiring young pros before him, though, he's now discovering that the devil is in all the other details that separate middle-of-the-pack finishes from what might have been. ■



Patek is going it mostly alone, fishing in a 6-year-old boat and doing whatever it takes to make it on Tour.

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PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

RIGGING FOR OFFSHORE FISHING

HOW TO SET UP A BASS BOAT FOR BETTER SUCCESS ON THE LEDGES

By Joe Balog

Every era sees advancements in fishing technology, but none has progressed so quickly as the last decade. Sonar, once limited to looking below the boat, can now see to each side and in front of our boats. GPS technology allows us to come within inches of a target with unparalleled accuracy. There are even trolling motors that “anchor” us in place without a rope.

All this technology has allowed anglers, especially tournament anglers, to target fish far offshore more easily. Electronics are the most important tools on the boat for offshore fishing, but there are other steps an angler can take to improve his rig for the offshore game.

Mounting Head Units

Mark Rose is the king of offshore bass fishing in the Mid-South. He understands deep-water bass and how to rig up to catch them. Rose begins by outfitting his boat with four large-screen electronics units – two at the dash and two at the bow.

The oversized screens help him better interpret the data his sonar delivers. He dedicates one console unit to navigation and traditional sonar, the other to side- and forward-looking sonar. This is where most of the work is done.

Brandon Hunter, a tournament pro, guide and electronics guru in the Kentucky Lake region, parallels Rose's setup with four big-screen Lowrance depth finders on his boat. Both he and Rose rely on mounts from Bass Boat Technologies. At the dash, they each use a side-by-side mount that keeps two large units directly in front of the driver's natural line of sight rather than off to the side. This helps avoid fatigue and increases safety. Up front, Rose and Hunter use a "stacked" bow mount with one unit on top of the other for easy viewing of maps and sonar.

PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN



For a complete picture of what's going on below, two units at the console are better than one.

Transducers

Like all pros, Rose frequently utilizes side-looking sonar, and is currently running a transducer that allows him to look outward at previously unheard of speeds, even while running on pad. However, the key to clear returns with any side-looking sonar system is transducer mounting location.

"The trick is to mount the transducer as close as you can to the bottom, and to avoid interference from prop wash and turbulence created by the engine," Rose says.

In recent years, side-looking transducers have been mounted up high directly beneath the jack plate. Rose mounts his new high-speed transducer on the flat area in front of the transom and behind the pad (see photo at top right), a few inches off center. That setup might not work with every boat, so it's best to consult a dealer or others with the same rig and adjust as necessary.

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



Seek advice on where to mount a transducer on your boat for best results.

"There's no exact science to it," he adds. "You don't want to have it too high because a boat has a pad on the hull, and the pad is the only thing in the water [when moving at a fast speed]. Everything else is above the water. You have to get it down there close to that pad."

Up front, Rose relies on a factory-mounted trolling motor transducer for forward-looking sonar and stresses the importance of this relatively new technology for relocating bass once a school has been moved by catching several fish.

Trolling Motor Vibration and Control

Rose and Scott Dobson, a Great Lakes ace with a recent Costa FLW Series win under his belt, know that trolling motors are critical tools for staying on waypoints, particularly in big water. Both make upgrades and adjustments to get the most out of their motors.

Rose often uses the Troll Perfect device, an aftermarket accessory that clamps to the trolling motor shaft to deaden vibration and allow the user to adjust the steering tension on a cable-steer trolling motor. Dobson now utilizes the Minn Kota Ultrex electric-steer motor for its Spot-Lock and Autopilot features.



In open water, Costa FLW Series hammer Scott Dobson favors an electric-steer motor guided by GPS technology to keep him on the fish.

Dobson used an electric-steer motor with the same features to win the 2016 Costa FLW Series event at Thousand Islands, and was impressed with the GPS anchoring technology. The new Ultrex unit combines all of these features with a traditional cable-steer pedal for bass anglers.

Rose also does all he can to quiet his trolling motor by employing a rubber dampening device made by Bowjax. There are a couple of types available – a model that wraps around the motor’s lower unit and one that wraps around the shaft.

Trolling Motor Interference

A common issue anglers face at the bow is trolling motor interference on the graph.



Ferrite rings help neutralize trolling motor “noise” on the graph.

PHOTO BY JOE BALOG



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

A clunky trolling motor will spook fish that might already be jittery. Various dampening aids will help alleviate the problem.



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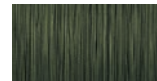
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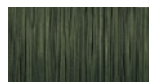
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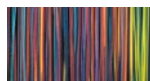
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"Every motor gets it. I don't care what brand or size," Rose claims.

There are several tricks that can be employed to eliminate interference. Motor and electronics companies can offer advice on rigging specifics. A ferrite ring, often referred to as a "choke," is a simple tool that can eliminate most or all interference. To install, wrap the transducer wire around the metal ring about eight times. It helps to deaden the electrical currents that can create noise. There are other types of chokes available. Again, check with manufacturers.

Other Fishing Accessories

How an angler rigs his boat is personal preference, but Hunter, who has boat-rigging experience at a Ranger dealership, has additional suggestions to help offshore anglers.

Hunter believes investing in a T-H Marine HOT FOOT throttle pedal is one of the best things an offshore angler can do to improve the safety of his boat.

"I think HOT FOOTs should be mandatory in all high-performance bass boats," Hunter says, "for the simple reason that they allow you to keep two hands on the wheel."

That's sound advice for any bass boater, but especially those fishing offshore, which often requires traversing big stretches of open, rough water dozens of times per day running waypoints.

Another must-have, according to Hunter, is a HydroWave unit. While the effectiveness of such technology is often debated, Hunter is a firm believer in it for offshore situations.

"It's not a cure-all, but when compared to someone who's not running a HydroWave, it can often give you a few extra fish," he says.

Power Up

The final puzzle piece is how to power all that electronic equipment adequately. Again, opinions vary, but as a Great Lakes angler Dobson needs his equipment to perform in all types of conditions, so he's somewhat particular about how he powers his equipment. He employs four massive 31-series boat batteries in the bilge area of his boat, all contained within a reinforced aluminum RMC battery tray with ratcheting tie-downs. This ensures he never loses a charge.

SHUT IT DOWN

When multiple anglers are parked on a ledge or media observers are following pros on the water, the mixing sonar signals can cause interference or negatively affect bass. The solution is the same for both issues.

"I turn it all off [when on the front deck]," Rose says, referring to his electronics and other powered equipment. "I use smaller lures and lighter line. I stay way back off the fish." ■



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WHAT'S INSIDE: PUTTING MINN KOTA'S NEW ULTREX TO THE TEST

What a West Coast big-bass expert uses to throw jumbo swimbaits

The Mendota Rig: If you haven't tried a reverse Texas rig, give this one a shot

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arm are virtually identical to those of the Fortrex. The head, shaft, wiring harness and foot pedal, along with a wireless remote, incorporate Minn Kota's i-Pilot technology.

It's worth noting that i-Pilot is a GPS system completely enclosed inside the motor, which accepts commands from the foot pedal and wireless remote without the need of a fish finder. A heading sensor pairs with the motor via Bluetooth to help the trolling motor find its way around out there.

On the Water

The Ultrex is cable-steered and operates with the same heel-toe steering that bass anglers are used to, but it varies from the Fortrex cable system due to Minn Kota's new Power Steering feature. A built-in electric motor activates whenever the pedal moves up or down underfoot, creating a signature whine and a unique "feel" when steering. I found it to be so responsive that I could actually steer with my hand on the pedal with no torque. The end result is better control and less foot and leg fatigue.

Tournament anglers will also love the motor's ability to spin and turn 390 degrees. This allows you to get out of tight spots quickly and easily without having to redirect the foot pedal midway through the maneuver.

Another thing I like about the Power Steering feature is that it locks in place whenever you take your foot off the pedal, allowing for a steady course when fishing down a straightaway or looking for bedding fish along the bank under continuous power. This Steering Lock feature automatically disengages the moment the pedal moves up or down under your foot.

MINN KOTA ULTREX 112

By Matt Williams

Bass anglers sometimes refer to a really sweet fishing spot as "the juice" and a hot new lure as "the bomb."

It'll be interesting to see what type of nickname gets pinned on the Minn Kota Ultrex once it finds its way into the hands of the masses.

Based on my experience with the workhorse thus far I

think it's the most responsive cable-steer trolling motor ever mounted to the deck of a bass boat. It is also by far the smartest.

I'm calling it a big-time "game changer." In fact, not owning one could be a built-in handicap that automatically puts you a step or two behind those who do if you fish tournaments.

First Impressions

The Ultrex is a hybrid that shares a mix of design features found in its popular predecessor, the super-tough Fortrex cable-steer motor, and the company's high-tech lineup of electric-steer bow units with i-Pilot.

The mounting bracket, motor housing, bow-guard housing and aluminum mono



ONE-PIECE COMPOSITE SHAFT

The one-piece shaft is fashioned from a durable composite material that bends or flexes upon impact, eliminating the need for the breakaway mount used with the Fortrex shaft. Minn Kota Brand Manager Brad Henry says the Ultrex shaft is actually stronger than the Fortrex shaft and will take much more abuse. It comes with a lifetime warranty.



FOOT PEDAL

The Ultrex foot pedal is designed a little wider than the Fortrex's in order to accommodate a series of command buttons for Spot-Lock, AutoPilot, Constant On and Power. A handy lighted indicator panel shows which feature is in use. It steers with the same heel-toe control that most bass anglers prefer.

Favorite Feature

The feature called Spot-Lock has received a lot of hype since the motor's introduction in July 2016, and after two months of evaluation I can tell you that all the hoopla is dead on.

Spot-Lock is an electronic GPS anchor that is easily activated by tapping the dedicated anchor button on the foot pedal or wireless remote. Doing so triggers a yellow light on the foot pedal and simultaneously creates a reference point in the trolling motor's memory bank.

Once activated, Spot-Lock tells the motor to make continuous speed and direction adjustments to help keep

itself pinned on the reference point, regardless of wind, current or wave velocity. You can also use appropriate keys on the wireless remote to "jog" left, right, up or down in 5-foot increments.

Spot-Lock enabled me to stay locked on offshore locations and focus exclusively on fishing instead of constantly fooling around with the trolling motor. I was able to stand side-by-side with a friend on the back deck for an hour, with the wind at our backs, and wreck a school of fish positioned 50 feet behind the boat.

I used Spot-Lock in winds as strong as 20 mph, and it performed flawlessly, keeping

the bow within just a few feet of the reference point 100 percent of the time. You know the motor is doing its job because of its intermittent operation and twisting/turning of the head as it jockeys to maintain its position.

Spot-Lock also came in handy when drifting over wind-blown flats, bed-fishing, fishing docks, culling, swapping baits, retying and taking photos because it allowed me to tend to business without the worry of drifting off of my fishing spots and then wasting valuable time getting repositioned. It's sort of like having twin Power-Poles that can reach bottom in any depth.

Performance Tips

- Be sure to read and follow the instructions when installing the motor and heading sensor compass and pairing the two together.
- The motor is high-tech, but not so much that you should be intimidated by it. Experiment with the functions to see what works for you.
- Always turn off the main breaker to the trolling motor when not in use. Otherwise, the heading sensor will slowly draw juice from the cranking battery.

HITS & MISSES

- + Provides the steering style of a foot pedal with Power Steering for improved handling and control
- + Zero torque, even on high-speed turns
- + Spot-Lock feature holds the boat in place
- + Lift assist for easy deployment and stowing
- + Push-to-test battery meter
- + Included LCD wireless remote for control from the back deck
- High price
- Motor noise, though you get used to the signature whine

DETAILS

Price: starting at \$2,199.99

Thrust: 80 pounds (24 volts) and 112 pounds (36 volts)

Shaft Lengths: 45, 52 and 60 inches

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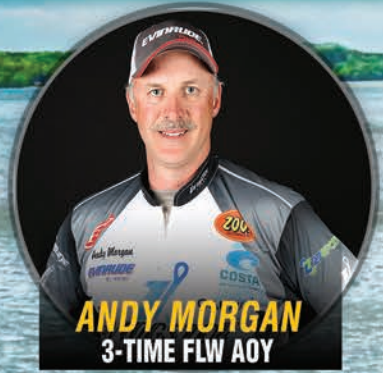
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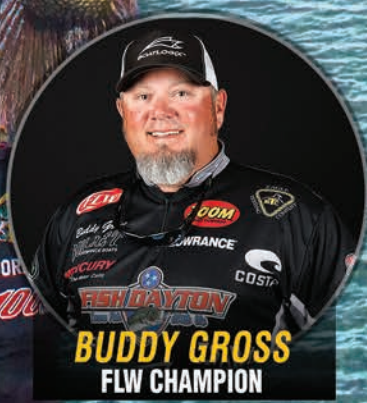
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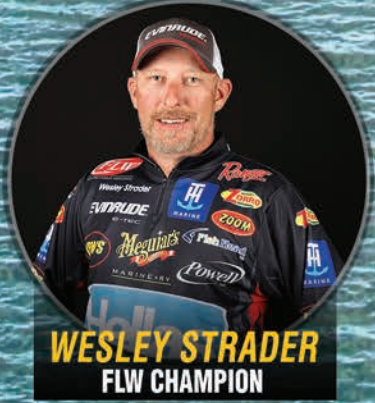
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HEAVY HARDWARE HAULERS

HOW ONE CALIFORNIA BIG-BASS HUNTER
GEARS UP FOR HEFTY SWIMBAITS

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MIKE GILBERT

Mike Gilbert is a 35-year-old big-bass junkie from Vista, Calif., with a serious hang-up on giant swimbaits. The addiction has cost him more than a few bucks spent on custom handmade lures and other specialty gear over the last few years, but it has paid off handsomely with some very large fish. In fact, Gilbert's affinity for jumbo lures has already rewarded him with more bragging-sized bass than most anglers will catch in a lifetime. Among them are nearly a half-dozen "teeners," including a massive 17.4-pounder that might be the largest bass ever documented on video from cast to catch.

Gilbert caught the fish with a jumbo 11-inch Hinkle Lures Glide Trout. In the video titled "Working Class Zero: Seventeen," which is available at Gilbert's Working Class Zero YouTube page (see more big-bass videos at workingclasszero.net), he takes full control of the enormous bass from start to finish, more or less winching the powerful fish straight to the boat and never giving it the opportunity to turn its head until it makes a last-second surge.

What's also clear in the video is the seemingly effortless manner in which Gilbert lobs the 10-ounce lure out there and lays it up near the dock.

None of this – his manhandling of the fish or his fluid casting with a big 10-ounce bait – happens by mistake. It stems from Gilbert's experience and knowledge of equipment for targeting big bass with big baits. According to Gilbert, getting outfitted for throwing swimbaits is no different than gearing up properly for other styles of fishing. It's a specialty tactic built around baits that demand specific gear in order to achieve optimum results.

Gilbert knows what it takes and has some advice for folks wanting to gear up for big-bait fishing.



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The Rod

Gilbert likes a long-handled rod with significant length and plenty of backbone for handling baits in the 4- to 10-ounce range. The size provides leverage to get the upper hand on large fish. According to Gilbert, the action needs to be carefully considered.

"A lot of guys have the misconception that a rod for big swimbaits should be a really stiff broomstick-style rod all the way to the tip, but that's not a good idea in my opinion," Gilbert says. "If the rod tip doesn't bend when you've got a bait hanging on the end of it, you've got too much rod for that bait. The rod tip should be soft enough that it loads up and really launches the bait when you cast. A rod too stiff also can cause you to rip the hooks out before you get the fish to the boat.

"Stick with something extra-heavy in the 8-foot range that is rated for lines in the 20- to 40-pound-test range," he says.

Though it's not the rod he used to catch the 17-pounder, the rod Gilbert is currently using is an 8-foot, 6-inch, extra-heavy prototype rod that he's helped design for Low Down Custom Rods of Tustin, Calif. If you're interested but can't wait for the prototype to be finished, Low Down offers a stock series of rods and can build a rod custom to any angler's specs.

"It's a great quality rod that really feels comfortable to my body," Gilbert says of the prototype. "It's got a moderate-fast tip and solid backbone that will handle big baits in the 4- to 10-ounce range very well. It also has a slow taper that is somewhat forgiving to your screw-ups and helps maintain some pressure on a fish if it jumps."

Another thing Gilbert likes about the rod is that it doubles nicely as an umbrella rig stick, thus eliminating the need for multiple rods.

"Having one rod that will handle several different baits is a big deal to me because it feels the same way no matter what bait I'm throwing, and I know exactly how it's going to perform under certain circumstances," he says.





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The Reel

Gilbert owns his share of low-profile baitcasters, but when it comes to throwing jumbo swimbaits he is a much bigger fan of round reels, including Shimano's 400-series reels such as the Cardiff, Calcutta (B or D) and Calcutta Conquest.

The bigger round reels are built around very rigid frames with beefed-up gears, reliable drags and gobs of spool space to accommodate the large-diameter lines typically matched with baits weighing a half-pound or more. They also have low gear ratios (the Cardiff at 5.2:1, Calcuttas at 5.1:1 and Calcutta Conquest at 5.6:1) designed for slow retrieves and optimum power.

It's worth noting that Gilbert's reel recommendations represent both ends of the price spectrum. The manufacturer's suggested retail price on the Cardiff is \$109.99. The Calcutta Conquest, which Gilbert has been using quite a bit, will set you back \$579.99, while both the Calcutta B and D will fall somewhere in between.

"I'm a huge fan of the Cardiff because it's a real work-horse and is dirt cheap in the grand scheme of things," Gilbert says. "It's a great entry-level reel. It doesn't have all the bells and whistles the Calcutta does, but for the money you can't beat it."

Gilbert says there is plenty to like about round reels when it comes to chunking and winding jumbo swimbaits.

"It's mostly about performance, power and ergonomics," he says. "You can throw big swimbaits on a [low-profile] bait-caster, but the bigger round reels just do a much better job. I feel like they provide me with way more control when it comes to casting big baits. The big reels fill your palm, and they are much better suited and balanced for the big rods that I prefer.

"They also provide plenty of winching power," he adds. "I keep my drag buttoned down pretty tight, so once I lay into the fish the big reel helps me keep that fish coming my way. That's a huge key with big fish. It makes it pretty difficult for them when they can't turn their head and their mouth is open like a parachute."

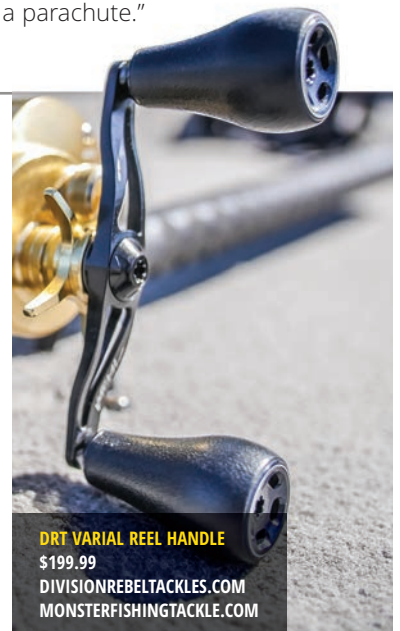
Bigger, Beefier Handles

Another benefit of round reels for big-bass hunting is that they come equipped with big handles and knobs that allow for superior control and winching power when a lunker comes calling. Gilbert adds even more winching power to his swim-bait reels by swapping out the stock handles for custom DRT Varial Reel Handles.

He says the heavy-duty machined handles are longer than stock handles and come equipped with oversized knobs that provide solid cranking power. The knobs even have their own ball bearings for smooth operation.

"Once you put them on it's hard to go back to stock because you get used to the extra size," Gilbert says. "The handles are about 5-10mm bigger than most handles out there. It makes a huge difference once you get used to it."

DRT is a Japanese company, but its reel handles are sold in the U.S. by Outdoor Pro Shop (monsterfishingtackle.com). The handles are favored by die-hard big-bait throwers who'll pay any price for performance, but at about \$200 per set are definitely optional for average anglers just dabbling in the swimbait game.



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The Line

Gilbert doesn't mince words here. He's a fluorocarbon guy, mainly because of its limited stretch, low visibility in clear water and superior resistance to abrasion.

"Seaguar AbraxX 20-pound fluorocarbon all the way," he says. ■



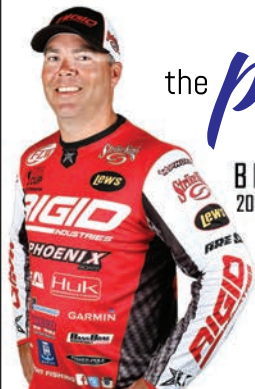
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THE MENDOTA RIG

THIS REFINED VERSION OF A REVERSE TEXAS RIG IS A GOOD TOOL FOR SHALLOW COVER

By Curtis Niedermier

PHOTOS & ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT PACE

The Mendota Rig falls into the category of “reverse Texas rig,” which, like the standard Texas rig, is a weedless, weighted soft-plastic combo. The difference is that everything has been flipped around. A weight is attached to the bend of the hook instead of on the line above the hook eye, and the soft plastic – usually a craw – is rigged with the claws pointed “up” the line.

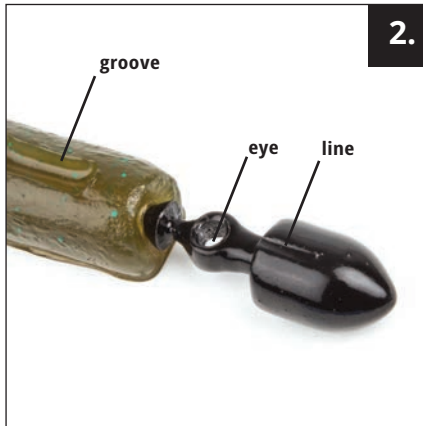
The concept of a reverse Texas rig isn't new. A version called the Okeechobee Rig was introduced by Uncle Josh about a decade ago but is no longer being made, and anglers have been putting together their own variations over the years, usually for the purpose of punching thick grass.

The Mendota Rig version, which is named for Lake Mendota near the Madison, Wis., home of its designer, Jim Torgerson, offers anglers a complete, refined system that includes weights, hooks and soft plastics designed to fit together. The included weight only comes in 1/4-, 5/16- and 1/2-ounce sizes, so it's not intended for punching the thickest of mats, but it's still a good option for pitching and other vertical-type or lift-drop presentations. Steve McQuin, president of C to C Bait Co. in Beaverdam, Wis., the company that manufactures and sells the Mendota Rig, says it's more of an all-purpose weedless rig for fishing around pads, brush and other shallow cover.

Here's how to assemble it:



Tie on the hook.



Insert the weight's spear point into the craw's tail, making sure to align the line on the weight with the groove in the plastic. The weight's eye should end up centered within the groove.



Twist the screw lock into the craw's "head" – the opposite end compared to a normal Texas rig.



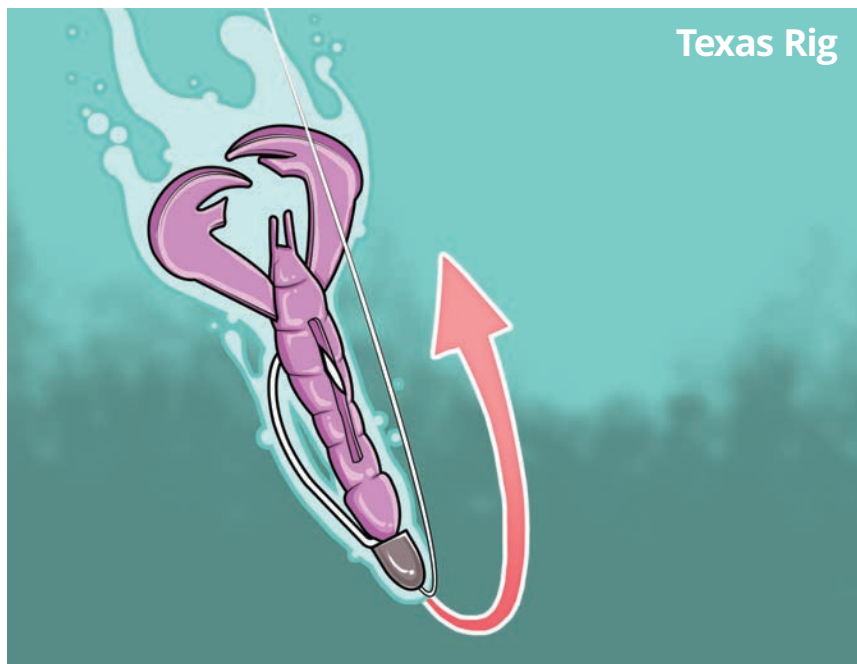
Bend the plastic so that the hook point can be passed through the eye in the weight and out the opposite side of the craw. It should end up in the open groove. Leave the hook point exposed or skin-hook it, depending on the cover being fished.

Why Reverse It?

A reverse Texas rig is compact, with no weight separation when it sinks or when it's pulled over limbs or grass, which minimizes snags.

Hooksets can improve, too. If a fish bites the weight, which sometimes happens on the drop, the fish should get the hook point, and there's no weight up the line to blow open the fish's mouth when the hook is driven home.

When pitching or flipping with an ordinary Texas rig, the bait and hook flip end-for-end when the weight pulls the rig down into the water. When a fish bites it on the fall, the angler has to turn the bait with the hookset (see below) before the point can penetrate. Conversely, when the Mendota Rig sinks, the hook points up the line in the direction of the hookset. The entire force of the set is directed toward driving the hook into the fish.



MIX & MATCH

The following examples show popular soft-plastic creatures and craws rigged with the Mendota Rig weight and various hooks. There are likely several other hooks that would work with each plastic, and while these combos appear to fit well with the Mendota Rig weight, they haven't been tested on the water to make sure that the hook can penetrate on the hookset. We'll leave that step up to you.



MISSILE BAITS BABY D BOMB
4/0 WIDE-GAP WITH SPRING KEEPER



ZOOM BABY BRUSH HOG
5/0 EWG



ZOOM ULTRA VIBE SPEED CRAW
5/0 WIDE-GAP MUSTAD WITH SPRING KEEPER (INCLUDED WITH MENDOTA RIG)



ZOOM ULTRA VIBE SPEED CRAW
3/0 OFFSET-SHANK WORM HOOK WITH O'SHAUGHNESSY BEND



4-INCH BERKLEY HAVOC PIT BOSS
5/0 EWG MONSTER



STRIKE KING RAGE CRAW
5/0 OFFSET-SHANK WORM HOOK WITH O'SHAUGHNESSY BEND



ZOOM Z-HOG JR.
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Mendota Advantages and Disadvantages

The one disadvantage of the Mendota Rig weight compared to other similar reverse Texas rig weights is that it doesn't come in any sizes heavier than 1/2 ounce. For that, you'll need to consider an alternative such as the Zappu Sasuteki Sinkers, which comes in sizes up to 1 1/2 ounce. Or you can make one with a heavy tungsten sinker and a piece of wire. Bend the wire in half to create an eye, and pass the two tag ends through the sinker. Bend them on the opposite side so the wire stays in place. It's crude, but it works.

The advantage of the Mendota Rig as a whole is that C to C has already worked out all the details. The plastic is designed to fit the 5/0 Mustad hook that's included, and a hollow space in the bait makes it easy to hook the weight. Torgerson worked out the kinks to make sure the weight and bait are less likely to ball up on the hook and prevent a good hookset.

1 1/2-OUNCE ZAPPU SASUTEKI SINKER



The rigid spear point is also a smart concept.

"The problem with a wire weight is if you set the hook really hard, those things [wires] just break," says McQuin. "We wanted to solve that problem. Another thing is they kind of flop around with the wire. It's not really incorporated that well into the bait. We wanted to come up with a plastic that was actually designed to hold that sinker. The third difference is we're the only ones that have a weight like this that has a skirt attachment."



Plastics

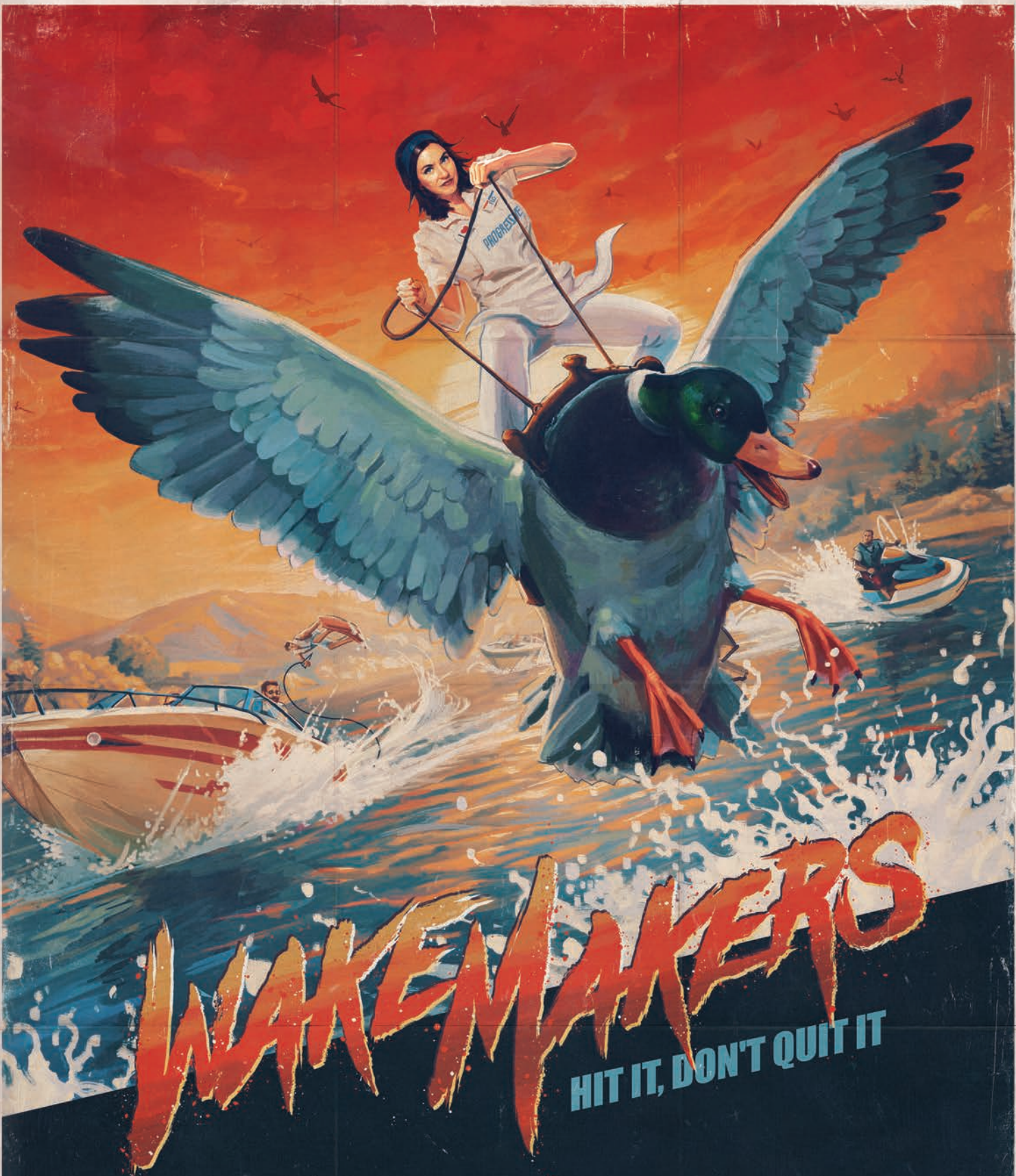
C to C sells three soft plastics that fit the system: a craw, skirted craw and tube. The tube is not a traditional hollow tube. It's solid so a screw lock can be used.

McQuin says pretty much any soft-plastic creature or craw can be used, but you might need to tinker with the hook size or cut down part of the bait's body to get everything to line up right. Wide-gap hooks and offset-shank worm hooks work with the weight, too.

Stocking Up

C to C sells packages with one weight, one hook and four plastics for \$9.89. Sinker packs, which are most popular, include three standard weights and one hook for \$4.99 or three skirted weights and one hook for \$6.49. Skirted weights come in only 1/4 and 1/2 ounce. They're available at slopfrogbaits.com. ■





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NEW GEAR FOR BASS HEADS

By Colin Moore

NavPod Pedestal Pods

Put expensive bow-mounted electronics on a pedestal with the new PedestalPod. Made of thick-gauge ABS material, the housing protects a unit in waterproof safety and keeps it 20 inches above the deck at a 45-degree angle so that it can be seen more easily. A double-gasket system keeps moisture out, and a powder-coated aluminum pedestal tube that's 1 3/4 inches in diameter protects wires and connections. Available for all popular brands with 7-, 9- or 12-inch displays, the PedestalPod starts at about \$300, depending on the size of the housing.

navpod.com

YETI Hopper Flip 12 and Hopper Two

Nothing beats a YETI cooler for keeping stuff cold, and the new Hopper Flip 12 and Hopper Two are just the tickets for anglers who spend hot summer days fishing tournaments. The soft-sided Hopper Flip's cube shape and wide-mouth opening make it just right for holding drink cans, fruit, candy bars or anything else that otherwise might wilt in the heat. A leak-proof zipper ensures better insulation, and a 1-inch layer of ColdCell insulation is sheathed in an outer DryHide Shell. Empty, the 11 1/2- by 12 5/8-inch cooler weighs just over 3 pounds. \$279.99

The soft-sided Hopper Two is available in three sizes – 20, 30 and 40 – and has the same features as the Flip 12 in terms of insulation and waterproofness, plus a shoulder strap and two double-stitched side handles. YETI changed to a more tapered body for more comfortable carrying and moved the zippered opening to make loading and unloading easier compared to the original Hopper. Depending on size, prices range from \$299.99 to \$399.99.

yeti.com

Costa Sunrise Silver Mirror

A new lens color said to provide more contrast in low-light conditions where more light transmission is desirable, Sunrise Silver Mirror is available in most of Costa's popular fishing glasses, including Fisch, Motu, Fantail and Isabela. In performance, the new lens color is similar to amber in bringing out contrasts and is recommended for fishing during twilight periods or when driving at dawn and dusk.

costadelmar.com

Fitzgerald MEGA JIG and Texas Jig

Designed to fish through the heaviest cover, the MEGA JIG is one of two new jigs offered by Fitzgerald. Twin adjustable weedguards that defend the point of the Gamakatsu hook distinguish the MEGA JIG, which also includes a spike trailer keeper and StarFlash skirt. The Texas Jig has twin weedguards and a smaller profile, and can be fished with a skirt when conditions allow or skirt-free when heavy grass requires a more streamlined approach with just a trailer. Sizes for both range from 1/2 to 1 1/4 ounce, in various colors. \$8.99

fitzgeraldrods.com



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YETI HOPPER FLIP 12



YETI HOPPER TWO



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HOW LAMBERT BLASTS LEDGE BASS



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



The Tennessee pro shares his best offshore-fishing advice

By Joe Sills

Advanced electronics changed everything about bass fishing on the Tennessee River. Jason Lambert knows because he was there when it happened. Lambert watched as tournament fields migrated from shorelines to ledges – a secret world that, as a kid on his uncle's commercial catfishing boat, he'd learned how to access.

Back then, finding ledges was a drawn-out process of triangulation based on lining up shoreline trees and long hours of searching for schools with a lure and a line. But as the science of ledge fishing developed around him, Lambert became a master of the game. His name is synonymous with tournament success in the Tennessee Valley. To date, he has a dozen top-10 finishes and three wins in FLW competition at Pickwick and Kentucky lakes.

This is how he goes about it.

Scout Your Schools

First choice, second choice, third choice, backup schools of bass – learn how to identify your best prospects and deal with them all when opportunities are presented.

“When I really started tournament fishing, we could fish a tournament at Pickwick and run to 10 or 12 holes a day,” Lambert says. “If they weren’t biting, you could come back and get them when they were. Nowadays, that’s not the case. If you leave a hole now, chances are that you aren’t going to get it back in a big tournament.”

Lambert’s solution to this development is to spend practice days idling at a snail’s pace while his electronics scour the river bottom for ledges and schools. Here, he’s mostly deploying side-scan imaging to pinpoint as many fish as possible in as many areas as possible.

According to Lambert, electronics are the most important part of it.

“I’ll make a few casts during practice, but only a few,” he says. “In three days, I might spend three hours with a rod in my hand.”

Once Lambert finds a school, he marks it on his graph and keeps rolling. Come tournament time, he’ll run back to see if the fish are still there, or if they’ve moved up or down the ledge.

Lambert is quick to note that many of the fish he locates in practice relocate when tournaments begin. When they do, he keeps moving from waypoint to waypoint and checking up and down ledges until he finds them again.

It’s not a perfect process, but doing the research ahead of time at least provides an angler with starting points for when the competition begins.



PHOTO BY D.W. REED II



Check for Size

While so much of offshore fishing revolves around electronics, Lambert believes it's easy to buy into one common misconception: that electronics can always reveal a fish's true size.

"People think you can tell how big a fish is by looking on a screen, but that isn't necessarily true," says Lambert. "If you think about the way electronics work, the [side-scan] transducer sends a beam under the boat, and if you've got a 6-pounder that's facing you and a 3-pounder that's perpendicular to you, the smaller fish is going to look bigger on your screen than a 6-pounder. That's why you have to make a few casts to see what's really going on down there."

In other words, there's no substitute for getting hands-on with the bass. For that reason, Lambert doesn't concern himself with the size of a fish on his screen. He's looking for numbers in a school. The size? He'll verify that with a rod and reel come tournament time.

"One thing I know about the Tennessee River is that you can catch three 2-pounders and then catch a 6-pounder," he says. "When those schools get big, there are big ones in there."





Set up Shop

Lambert never makes a cast on the Tennessee River without seeing fish on his graph. Period.

"I'm not going to waste my time," he says.

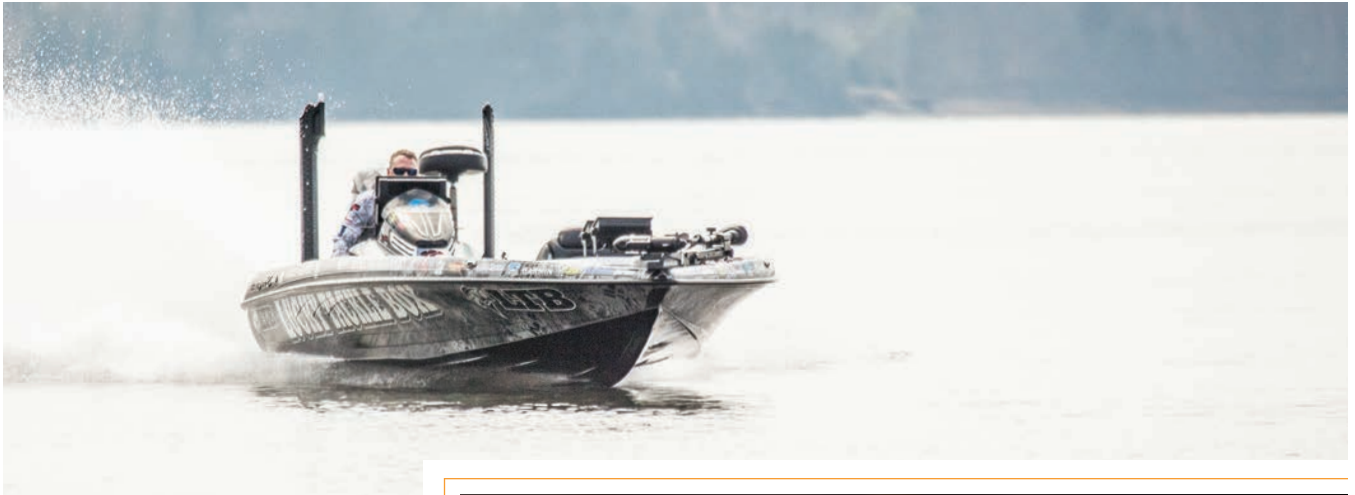
But when he does cast, he's not particular about which direction he's casting. He knows that tactic diverges from some common ledge-fishing beliefs, but he's also got the trophy case to back him up.

"A lot of people think you have to set up downcurrent and throw up at a school. I don't think that's true," says Lambert. "If I'm idling toward a school of fish and I'm on the upcurrent side, that's where I throw from. Sure, you can work around a school sometimes and try to make them bite from different angles, but as long as I know they are there, that's what I'm worried about. I was fishing the winning

school at Kentucky Lake from the 'wrong' side, and they weren't biting from the 'right' side."

That suggests another facet of bass behavior Lambert has noticed time and again. Ledge fish move around, and an angler shouldn't hesitate to move around, too.

"Once those fish get a little pressure on them, they will move around a ledge," he adds. "At Kentucky Lake, where I won last year, the biggest key to me winning was knowing that they move around. The first two days I was catching fish out of groups of six instead of groups of 100. They had moved around because of the pressure, and I was basically fishing the perimeters of where the schools were. It's something I learned at Pickwick, and that's how I crushed them at Kentucky. I ran hole after hole after hole until I finally got a school fired up, and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I didn't know where they were."



Run and Gun

When first targeting a school, Lambert's strategy is to create chaos.

"When I pull up on a school of fish, my objective is to throw the biggest, loudest, nastiest thing in there that I can on the first cast," says Lambert. "If you do that, you're going to get the most aggressive fish in there to eat it. Usually, that's a big one, because that big guy got big by eating."

What does he cast? Take your pick: Lambert's boat is stacked with 3/4- and 1-ounce swimbaits, giant worms, deep-diving crankbaits and magnum spoons. They comprise the arsenal that's earned him a reputation as one of the FLW Tour's most consistent power anglers on the ledges. But – just in case – he's also squirreled away a drop-shot rig, a trick picked up from longtime friend and finesse maestro Cody Meyer.

In tournaments, Lambert might move on if he doesn't quickly get a big bite. And that's fine. With three days' worth of waypoints chalked up from practice, there's always another ledge to fish.

"I've gotten beat several times by running and gunning," he notes. "But typically, multi-day tournaments on the river aren't won in a single spot."

Lambert's ledge strategy is born of adaptation. It's a response to the way Tennessee River angling has evolved, and the way fishermen have evolved with it since side-scan and contour maps have lifted the veil from its off-shore secrets. But in the end, the strategy boils down to a universal truth in tournament fishing: He who finds the most fish often wins.



FALCONRODS.COM

Lambert's Gear Guide

Swimbaits

Lambert deploys a 3/4- to 1-ounce Scrounger Head with a 7-inch Castaic Jerky J (technically a soft jerkbait, but Lambert lumps it in with swimbaits) with a 7-foot, 10-inch, extra-heavy Duckett Micro Magic Pro rod and a Duckett 360 reel (6.3:1 gear ratio) on 16-pound-test Sunline Super FC Sniper fluorocarbon line.

"You really want that long, heavy rod to have enough backbone to get that hook home on a long cast," he says.



● 7-inch Castaic Jerky J

Magnum Spoons

Lambert pairs a nickel-finish 8-inch Castaic Heavy Metal Spoon with a Duckett 360 reel (7.1:1 gear ratio) spooled with 20-pound-test Sunline Super FC Sniper fluorocarbon and an even heavier 7-foot, 8-inch Duckett White Ice rod.

"That thing [the spoon] is tossing and turning and going everywhere, so chances of [line] frays are higher. Always go with 20-pound line."



● Castaic Heavy Metal Spoon

Worms

Lambert uses a 7-foot, 6-inch, heavy-action rod with a Duckett 360 reel (7.1:1) and 16-pound-test fluorocarbon line to throw a Texas-rigged 11-inch Gambler Ledge Worm or 8-inch Gene Larew TattleTail Worm with a pegged 1/2-ounce weight.

"Any of the big paddle-tail, twist-tail or straight-tail worms work," Lambert says. "It needs to be a slower presentation, and it needs to be big."



● 8-inch Gene Larew TattleTail Worm

● 11-inch Gambler Ledge Worm

Crankbaits

For crankbaits, Lambert prefers a 7-foot, 6-inch, medium-heavy rod with 12-pound-test fluorocarbon on baits diving 15 feet or less, and 16-pound-test line on deeper-diving baits.

"I like the new 6th Sense Cloud 9 Series with a 5.3:1 Duckett 360 reel," he says. ■



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EYES ON EELGRASS

As eelgrass expands its range throughout the Tennessee River system, new patterns are emerging for savvy anglers who understand how bass relate to it

By Steve Calhoun

Having fished on the Tennessee River his entire life, Buddy Gross knew all about the eelgrass in Lake Guntersville. Yet, in May 2016 when he was looking for productive areas for an FLW Tour stop on Pickwick Lake – another impoundment of the Tennessee River chain – Gross was shocked to find the waxy, green grass growing there as well. Pickwick never has been considered much of a grass lake compared to Guntersville, which has miles of vegetation.

"I didn't know it was in Pickwick until practice when I found it," says the second-year Tour pro. "Then I started going back upriver from where I found it, because when you find some usually you can move upriver and find more."

He did, and Gross began exploiting the wavy clumps of long, green leaves. Whether the bass preferred the eelgrass as a current break, forage ambush site or some other reason, Gross didn't care. In the tournament, he mined the spot over four days for 20 bass weighing more than 74 pounds to claim his first Tour championship.

Gross figures eelgrass has been in Guntersville, or the upriver Crow Creek tributary of it, for at least 20 years. That coincides with weekend tournament anglers locating it in the early 2000s near the B. B. Comer Bridge area not far from Scottsboro, Ala., and Goosepond Colony.

Now, eelgrass is expanding its range, and anglers are learning ways to tap into its bass-fishing potential.

The Expansion

Eelgrass is a native grass that's common throughout the country. Its growth in the Tennessee is probably a sign of overall improvement in water quality in the system. But will eelgrass take to other Tennessee River lakes as it has in Guntersville? Fluctuating seasonal water levels might prevent it from taking hold to a great degree. Wheeler, the next lake below Guntersville, has potential as evidenced by its spotty, decades-old history with milfoil or hydrilla downstream of the Decatur stump flats. Pickwick has it, and Gross already has seen it in Chickamauga, too.

He says that originally the eelgrass he found in Guntersville was growing in areas where hydrilla and milfoil were absent.

"Now it seems to be growing all over," he says. "It's growing in deeper areas, and I think the lack of rain and current the last few years changed a lot of things, too. It seems to grow in a harder bottom because it likes current. It'll grow in the bottoms of the ditches a lot of times."

FLW Tour pro Braxton Setzer, who has a degree in fisheries management from Auburn University, has tracked the new growth, too.

"It really came on strong the last few years, for sure, and it's growing out a little deeper than you'd expect at Guntersville," he says. "It definitely changes the dynamic. Bass will relate to the eelgrass more than hydrilla or milfoil at certain times, I suspect, so this just gives them another option."

Tour rookie Justin Atkins also is sure it'll stick around in Pickwick, although perhaps not in such profusion as in Guntersville.

"I didn't know it was there until Buddy found it last year," he says. "Those areas are very precise, and behind that island [Kroger Island, where Gross won] there's a lot of Indian mounds and gravel, so that is one reason it grows there. But TVA draws Pickwick down in winter, so the grass doesn't consistently grow well there with the bottom makeup and drawdown. It will be interesting to see how it does there."

How to Fish It

Atkins, Setzer and Gross say the eelgrass they've found on Guntersville and elsewhere grows at depths from shallow to 12 feet deep – occasionally deeper. They've focused more on the deeper grass, usually from 6 to 12 feet, on channel ledges and points. While the shallower grass might offer some specific spots, such as open holes where they could try soft plastics or jigs, the deeper water seems to have more allure to the bass they're seeking.

"Bass always are going to live around current-related situations," Atkins says. "In summer they will get on the front side [of the grass] and in eddy breaks, and in winter when their metabolism is slow they'll get on the backside. They use it as a current break and feeding chute in winter."

"In winter, with hydrilla or milfoil that dies off and comes back green, you were usually going to catch fish. Now I think with the eelgrass they've taken to it better. I don't know what kind of oxygen it puts out, like hydrilla and milfoil,



PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL

Buddy Gross recognized the potential for catching bass out of eelgrass at Pickwick in 2016 and tapped it for an FLW Tour win.

+ MORE EELGRASS POSITIVES

By TJ Maglio

Editor's note: TJ Maglio pens FLW's Bass Science department. He has a degree in wildlife ecology and works with some of the top fisheries managers in the country.

Vallisneria, or eelgrass, might be new to some Tennessee River anglers, but it's certainly not new to that region of the country. It is a native aquatic grass, and if anything the recent spread should be described as a "resurgence" rather than an introduction. There could be many reasons for this, and more study needs to be done to unlock the specific factors involved, but it's likely in some part due to the (relatively) cleaner and more stable water that flows through the Tennessee River today as compared to 20 and even 40 years ago.

One of the frequent goals of conservation biology is to restore native species that have seen decreases. In that respect, the increases in the eelgrass prevalence and abundance in the Tennessee River system should be considered a very positive thing for the health of the system. The fact that it also improves the fishing is just a side benefit.

In addition to it being good bass habitat and top-notch waterfowl forage, eelgrass provides other system services that make it a boon to fisheries. It grows dense root masses, creating a "sod" effect in areas with current, which minimizes bottom erosion. Eelgrass also decreases turbidity and clears the water by trapping sediment. It also provides dense cover, which helps young-of-the-year bass and forage species, and harbors tons of aquatic invertebrates, which are hugely important to the whole food chain.

In short, eelgrass is a good thing.

grass with the baits, keeping them just above it and snapping the lure to pop it free when snagged.

"Take a [Rapala] DT-6 crankbait and as soon as it buries up, you snap it and keep going if a fish doesn't have it," Gross says. "Big Traps come through it. ChatterBaits come through it. It's not like burying up in milfoil. Eelgrass is real crispy."

Gross throws his baits on 17-pound-test Seaguar fluorocarbon line on a 7-foot, 3-inch, extra-heavy Hammer rod with a Daiwa Tatula CT Type-R reel. Atkins throws crankbaits on 15-pound test and swimbaits on 20-pound test. Because of how eelgrass breaks free, neither believes it's imperative to use heavy braided line as might be the case when fishing hydrilla or milfoil.

Electronics and Eelgrass

When Gross won at Pickwick, he used his Lowrance electronics to find bass relating to clumps of eelgrass and holes within the grass.

"I can tell if it's eelgrass and see how many fish are around it and everything," says Gross. "Eelgrass in its early

but it doesn't completely die like they do and wash away.

"I don't know of anyone who has gotten on a big flipping bite around eelgrass in summer – maybe a swimbait or something if they are using it as a current break," he adds. "Milfoil grows far apart and creates tunnels, and hydrilla grows tight and tough. Eelgrass is always green and alive. You can throw a 1/2-ounce Trap [lipless crankbait] in eelgrass, let it get a slack line and start working it back. If it hangs up you can snap it and it'll come free."

Gross favors a Jenko Big Wig Magnum hair jig and Tennessee River Tackle Tremor Head with a paddle tail or straight-tail swimbait, the latter for cooler water. On ledges in deeper water around eelgrass he'll opt for a 1- or 1 3/4-ounce head to keep the rig down; for shallow water Gross uses a 1/2- or 3/4-ounce head. Gross also will throw a Zoom Z-Craw on a swim jig or ChatterBait around the grass and sticks with shad colors for all the soft plastics.

Atkins favors a Berkley Warpig lipless crankbait in 1/2 or 3/4 ounce. He also prefers a Berkley Hollow Belly Swimbait with a 1/2- or 3/4-ounce head, depending on how aggressive the bass are.

Gross and Atkins fish the eelgrass the same way: ticking the top of the

PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



Tour rookie Justin Atkins says eelgrass creates new patterns for anglers to fish on the Tennessee River, particularly in winter.

stages is real clumpy, and it's a hard grass, so it has a [sonar] shadow behind it. It grows really round; most of the clumps will be roundish.

"Then they start growing together. The clumps get bigger and start getting together and making different kinds of lines. A grass like hydrilla will start at a depth and create a line for a mile along that contour. Eelgrass kind of just grows in the bottom of places, and it just spreads out."

Gross says that as eelgrass clumps grow together, holes form within the beds. Though he's not sure why they form – perhaps patches of harder or softer bottom – keying on those voids can lead an angler to the fish.

Aside from how it grows, the grass itself is also distinguishable.

"It takes time to tell the difference [in eelgrass and other grasses], but if you see hydrilla on StructureScan, you can actually see the stalk going up and

the leaves," Gross says. "The leaves will be the harder places, and a hard line [sonar return] will form on those places. Eelgrass will be a hard line from top to bottom. It's such a hard, crispy grass. It's like a shell bed. It'll be bright white."

ALL ABOUT EELGRASS

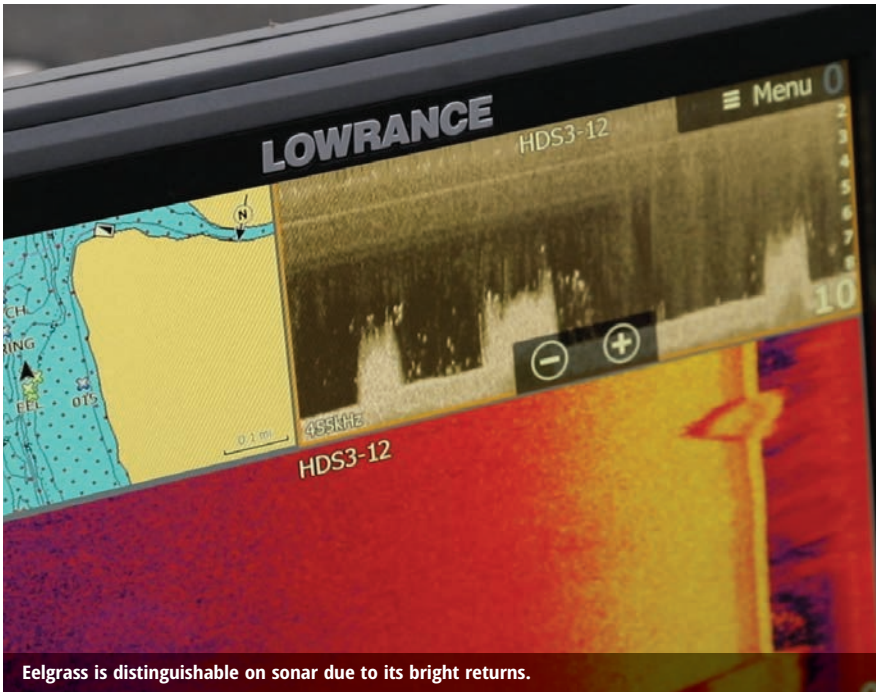
Fishing eelgrass on the Tennessee chain isn't quite the same as fishing it elsewhere in its range, and the system's current, channels and other governing factors require some study of how the grass grows.

Common eelgrass (*Vallisneria americana*) is known by a variety of names, including tape grass and wild celery or water celery. Often used as an aquarium plant and eaten by waterfowl and some shorebirds, eelgrass in various forms is found throughout the world. It's hardy enough to withstand low water temperatures in Canada as well as equatorial heat and high salinity.

Eelgrass can grow to about 5 to 6 feet long and has long leaves that usually are about an inch wide or less. With no branches like hydrilla, coontail or Eurasian milfoil, the eelgrass might grow in large areas, and will mat up in shallow water, but not to the same density as hydrilla.

Eelgrass might grow in smaller clumps or wide swaths thanks to its rhizome root system (a rhizome is actually a horizontal stem that grows out and produces new plant shoots and roots, allowing the plant to spread). Like most aquatic vegetation, it will capitalize on the best available bottom surface – it prefers a hard bottom – for growing and proliferation.

Unlike milfoil or hydrilla, which have nodes on their stems that allow the plant to re-establish and grow elsewhere when pieces are broken off, eelgrass leaves that break away can't produce a new plant. ■



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WHAT'S INSIDE:

SPRINGTIME TACTICS THAT WORKED AT HARRIS CHAIN AND CUMBERLAND

How Buddy Gross fishes deep grass with swimbaits

Winning ways from the third annual YETI FLW College Fishing Open at Kentucky Lake

Houchins taps tough-to-reach backwater at Dardanelle

DETAILS

March 9-12, 2017
Presented by Ranger Boats
Hosted by Lake County, Florida



DORTCH WINS HARRIS ON SPAWN-OFFSHORE COMBO

PITCHING PADS AND "TRAPPING" HYDRILLA WERE THE KEY TACTICS

By Rob Newell



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

Admittedly not a fan of sight-fishing, Dortch blind-cast to spawners and fished offshore hydrilla.

In professional bass fishing, sometimes knowing your fishing weakness is better than knowing your fishing strength.

Bradley Dortch knows this point well. The FLW Tour rookie from Atmore, Ala., does not claim to be a specialist in a particular technique, but he knows one thing he is not: a bed-fisherman.

"Fishing for bedding bass is just not my thing," Dortch says. "I don't like to get in canals and backwaters with the crowd and troll around just looking into the water. I like to fish, make casts, wind and rip something to provoke a bite. I feel like I'm wasting time trolling around looking for beds."

That's why when Dortch saw that the FLW Tour event on the Harris Chain of Lakes was set for mid-March, he had a sparkle of hope for a big finish.

Dortch actually lived in Celebration, Fla., from 2008-2013. During that time he fished a lot on Toho, Kissimmee and Okeechobee and even sampled the Harris Chain a few times.

"I learned quickly that January and February was not my time of year," Dortch says. "That's when Florida bass get on beds strong, and sight-fishing or pitching to ones you can't see are the dominant patterns."

Dortch typically sought out the first opportunity when targeting postspawn

bass could compete with the spawn bite. In his Florida experience, that shift often happens sometime in March, depending on the weather during winter.

At the Harris Chain Tour event March 9-12, he knew the tipping point would be tenuous, especially with water temperatures hitting the 70-degree mark in practice and more bass moving to the beds where sight-fishermen would have a chance at big limits.

Knowing the situation, Dortch had a game plan to target spawners, but he was always prepared to transition from the last of the bedding bite to the beginning of the postspawn bite. When the situation shifted he managed a final-day comeback to win the event with a total of 73 pounds, 9 ounces.

In and Out

During the first two days of the event those pros that were sight-fishing and pitching beds earned the headlines. But as the tournament progressed, the bedding bite dried up and a strong offshore bite developed. Dortch had the best of both worlds, getting out of the blocks strong with a bedding bite and then rallying on the final day with an offshore pattern.

Dortch is the first to admit he didn't exactly plan it that way, though.

"It just sort of unfolded like that," he says. "I felt like that canal sight bite was really winding down, especially with all the boats prowling around in them. I thought canals might produce some checks, but not a win."

Dortch thought a late wave of big main-lake spawners would possibly move up to pad stems during the tournament where they could be caught by pros pitching soft plastics to bedding bass they could not see.

CONDITIONS

Weather | mostly sunny with light wind the first three days; overcast and calm on the final day

Air Temperature | mid-50s to low 80s

Water Temperature | low 70s

Moon Phase | waxing to full

Predominant Lake Features | residential canals, various emergent and submergent grasses, and shell beds

"In my mind that was the bite to beat," he says. "I had some good bites that way in practice, so that's the way I had planned to start the tournament."

Dortch stuck with his pad-pitching game all through day one, weighing in 15 pounds, 4 ounces to start the event in 29th place.

On day two, he fished pads again, but by 1 o'clock he only had three fish in the livewell and his patience was wearing thin. Plus, a generous breeze was tempting him away from the pads toward offshore hydrilla.

"Pitching those pads is so slow. I was going out of my mind," Dortch explains. "I got so bored with it. I finally pulled the trolling motor and ran to a stretch of hydrilla near an island in Harris to throw a trap [lipless crankbait] for a change of pace. I was hoping the wind might help that bite."

As Dortch ripped a lipless rattler in scattered hydrilla along the island, he remembered marking a big clump of

hydrilla off the tip of the same island during one evening of practice.

"I was actually running in at dusk, and I ran over a big clump that just came up out of nowhere," he says. "I hit a waypoint on it and kept going. So as I fished down the side of the island [in the tournament], I decided to work my way out to the point where I had marked that clump. As soon as I got near my waypoint, I caught a 7-pounder and 5-pounder on back-to-back casts."

As Dortch continued to work his way around the clump, he discovered there were actually two clumps split by a gap.

"If I cast right between the two clumps, I could work a trap through there clean," he says. "If my cast landed anywhere else, it bogged down immediately. It was like a single-cast deal. That's where the big bites came from."

The two big fish anchored Dortch's 21-pound, 2-ounce catch on day two to move him into fifth place.

POSTSPAWN PATTERNS DOMINATED TOP 10

Bradley Dortch won the FLW Tour event presented by Ranger on the Harris Chain of Lakes by switching from a spawn pattern to a postspawn pattern in the middle of the tournament. He was not alone in his assessment that the spawn was going away fast.

The only pro to make the top 10 totally by sight-fishing was John Cox, who led the first three days, but fell behind on day four and finished third. The rest of the top 10 either started the tournament fishing offshore for postspawn bass or switched to postspawn patterns midway.

Palm Bay's JT Kenney finished runner-up thanks to a massive 27-pound, 3-ounce limit on the final day.

"I had a couple of decent days pitching pads," Kenney says, "but on day three I only caught 10 pounds doing it. That's when I knew that pattern was toast. So the last day, I took a gamble on some offshore shell beds I had found during practice over on Griffin, and it was on."

Shane LeHew, who finished fourth, also started the event on spawning fish but ended it fishing out for schoolers. Matt Reed finished fifth by Carolina rigging offshore shell beds.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



Dortch pitched a soft stick bait up shallow around lily pad stems for his spawning fish.

The Comeback

When Dortch arrived to his two hydrilla clumps on day three, the bite was on. He caught several keepers but lost his two biggest bites of the morning, including one he believed was in the 7-pound class.

Once the sun got up and the lake slicked off, Dortch moved back to the pads to start the pitching game again. He redeemed himself with an 8-pounder, which kept him in fifth place going into the final day.

Day four started with a big bonus for Dortch: The time change due to daylight saving meant anglers would be leaving right at safe light, essentially an hour sooner.

"Low light or wind was the key to that single-cast spot," Dortch says. "When they let us go so early that final day, I knew that spot would be on."

Dortch lit up the leaderboard with a 7-pounder right off the bat. An hour later he switched to a paddle-tail worm and finished off his limit with an 8-pounder that capped a final-day rally of 22 pounds, 2 ounces for the win.

"The five years I lived in Florida, I'd struggle in January and February," Dortch says. "But once they started ganging up in offshore grass after the spawn, I'd be the first guy out there winding something for them to eat. And that's exactly what happened at the Harris Chain."

TOP FIVE

NAME	HOMETOWN	WEIGHT	FISH	WINNINGS
1. BRADLEY DORTCH	ATMORE, AL	73-09	20	\$100,700
2. JT KENNEY	PALM BAY, FL	71-13	20	\$30,000
3. JOHN COX	DEBARY, FL	69-01	20	\$25,000
4. SHANE LEHEW	CATAWBA, NC	66-01	20	\$20,100
5. MATT REED	MADISONVILLE, TX	64-14	20	\$19,000

Winning Lures

Dortch primarily relied on three lures throughout the tournament.

On day one, he was committed to pitching as he tried to milk the last wave of spawners that were bedding on main-lake pad roots. For that technique he relied on a NetBait Salt Lick (junebug) with a 5/16-ounce Picasso tungsten weight. He pitched the rig on 60-pound-test Sunline FX2 braid with a 20-pound-test Sunline Super FC Sniper leader.

On days two and three, Dortch began to jump back and forth between pitching pads and ripping an XCalibur One Knocker (chrome and blue) through offshore hydrilla beds in 5 to 6 feet.

"I was torn between pitching pads and 'trapping' grass, so I let the weather sort of tell me what to do," he says. "If it was calm and slick, I felt more comfortable pitching pads. But if a breeze kicked up, I went straight to the grass. A lot of my stuff was all pretty close in Harris and Little Lake Harris, so I could just bounce around with the weather conditions."

On the final day, Dortch committed to the offshore hydrilla. He caught his tournament-winning kicker of some 8 pounds on a NetBait Big Bopper Worm by swimming it through the same gap between two clumps of hydrilla where he fished the lipless rattler.

"I was worried about losing another big one on the One Knocker, so I went to the worm with a single hook," Dortch says. "I'd rather use a single-hook bait on big fish in grass than a treble-hook bait because of less chance of losing them."

LOCAL ANGLER CROSNOE WINS CO-ANGLER CROWN

Familiarity with the Harris Chain was the biggest advantage that Inverness, Fla., co-angler Robert Crosnoe had over his competition when the FLW Tour arrived in central Florida. He made his knowledge of the local fishery pay off with a 33-pound, 1-ounce two-day weight to win the co-angler division.

"I live close by, so I fish this lake a lot, and I know what baits work, and they worked for me," says Crosnoe.

He fished a watermelon red Zoom Magnum Ultra Vibe Speed Worm on a 5/0 Gamakatsu Heavy Cover hook and a 1/16-ounce weight on day one. On day two, he switched to a 1/2-ounce BOOYAH Hard Knocker and a black and blue or green pumpkin Gambler Fat Ace.

"On day one I was dragging the Speed Worm over eelgrass flats, and on day two I was throwing the BOOYAH over deeper grass beds," says Crosnoe. "My big bass, a 6-pounder, came while dead-sticking the Fat Ace in a spawning canal." ■



PHOTO BY JOEY WHITE



A Big Bopper Worm (left) produced Dortch's final-day kicker. The Salt Lick worm and One Knocker did the rest.



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MARTIN MAKES MORE HISTORY AT CUMBERLAND

FLORIDA PRO GETS RECORD EIGHTH TOUR-LEVEL WIN

By Rob Newell

It's fair to say that when the FLW Tour pulled into Somerset, Ky., in early April for stop No. 4 on Lake Cumberland, most of the competitors knew little about the lake. Compared to other typical Tour stops such as Lake Okeechobee, Beaver Lake or Kentucky Lake, Cumberland was a veritable "clean slate" in terms of tournament fishing history.

Prior to this year, the last time FLW visited the lake was in May 2006 for an FLW Series event that was won by Mike Hawkes with a total of 46 pounds, 15 ounces.

Even for the pros currently on Tour who fished that event more than a decade ago, Cumberland has undergone a considerable amount of change. For a six-year period that ended in early 2013, the lake level was pulled down some 40 feet to repair the dam, and new woody growth flourished on the

lake's fertile bottom. Once the lake was refilled, the new growth helped regenerate the food chain and fish populations in the 66-year-old impoundment, but it also greatly changed the bass-fishing playing field, essentially making it a new lake to most anglers.

An 18-inch minimum size limit on smallmouths served as another X factor going in. Catching smallmouths was not a problem; however, catching smallies that crossed the 18-inch mark was a different story. Thus, committing to smallmouths exclusively was a dicey game, and keeper smallmouths became the golden ticket of the event. Such "overs" would weigh nearly 4 pounds – a huge bonus to any Cumberland limit.

Finally, a vicious cold front howled through Kentucky on the first day of the tournament, transforming what had been a warm practice period into a

frigid event. Water temperatures tumbled some 10 to 15 degrees back into the 50s. Meanwhile, the water level rose several inches each day.

Through all the unknowns and the ups and downs of the Lake Cumberland event, Scott Martin emerged as the pro who out-fished 163 other competitors over four days to win a record eighth tour-level tournament.

Martin took the lead on day one with the tournament's best limit, which weighed 19 pounds, 7 ounces and was comprised of four smallmouths and a largemouth. He stayed in the top five the next two days with mixed-bag limits in the 12- to 15-pound range and rallied the final day with a closing effort of 13-12 to win with a total of 60 pounds, 1 ounce.

Martin had never laid eyes on Lake Cumberland before the tournament. When he saw it for the first time in



PHOTO BY CHAD LOVE

Martin weighed a mixed-species bag, but his ability to catch 18-inch keeper smallies helped set him apart from the rest of the field.

CONDITIONS

Weather | wet, cold and windy on day one; cold and breezy on day two; warmer with less wind on the weekend

Air Temperature | 35 to 75 degrees

Water Temperature | 55 to 62 degrees

Moon Phase | nearly full

Predominant Lake Features | rocky highland reservoir with many young, submerged trees

practice, it reminded him of a cross between Arkansas' Beaver Lake and Alabama's Lewis Smith Lake.

"Steep and deep," Martin says was his initial reaction to seeing Cumberland. "It looks like Beaver, but it's steeper and deeper. It's much more vertical like Smith. There are no sloping banks; it's more like canyons. When you get into the very back of a pocket, it's still 25 feet deep.

"Whenever I encounter steep highland impoundments like that I automatically think suspended fish that relate to vertical cover," he says. "Trees, bluffs, docks – anything they can move up and down on vertically to feel comfortable."

The other thing that caught Martin off guard was the sheer size of Cumberland. At about 65,000 acres, it's certainly large, and its jagged, seemingly never-ending shoreline only enhances the scale.

"I knew it was big, but you can't really understand how big until you get on it," Martin says. "The pockets and creeks go for miles and miles. It's pretty overwhelming. It's the kind of lake that lends itself well to pattern fishing because it's so vast."

The Area

According to Martin, the general area he picked to fish during the tournament was a big key to his victory. He spent most of his time in a six-mile section near the dam on the northwest side of the lake. That area of Cumberland features a lot of obscure creeks and pockets that were shielded from the wicked 30-mph northwest winds that rode in on the passage of a cold front.

"With that nasty weather, my water remained remarkably stable," Martin says. "I heard other guys talking about how their areas had milked up from all the waves and wind off that front. But every day my water looked exactly like it had the day before: clear and green. Water stability was a huge thing for me."

In addition, Martin found that area of the lake also harbored all three species of bass.

"Being so far down the lake I was worried it would only be a smallmouth and spotted bass deal," Martin says. "But once I caught a couple of decent largemouths in the backs of those pockets down by the dam, I knew that's where I would fish the tournament. Having access to all three species at one time was a real bonus to me."

The Lures

For the majority of the tournament, Martin relied on one lure: a deep-diving suspending jerkbait in translucent shad that would get down to about 9 feet on 12-pound-test P-Line Tactical Fluorocarbon. Martin normally fishes a suspending jerkbait on 10-pound test, but he bumped it up to 12-pound test at Cumberland because he was fishing around so many trees and bushes.

"Getting hung up in that stuff with the jerkbait was just part of the process," he says. "Going to 12-pound test allowed me to break the branches off with a steady pull so I could get my bait back easily without breaking it off in the tree."

Martin committed to the jerkbait because he felt that most of the fish were suspended down about 8 to 10 feet deep in trees that were about 20 to 25 feet tall, based on what he'd seen on his forward-looking sonar.

"Several of the fish I caught during the week I saw as a blob suspended in the tree at about 10 feet," he says. "I'd cast past the tree by about 10 yards and work the bait down to the fish's level and watch the fish come get my bait on the screen."

Martin was also confident that his fish were of the prespawn variety.

"The temperatures were dropping and the water was rising, so it was a total prespawn deal to me," Martin says. "If they were going on beds, I would have caught more on a jig or shaky head, but I didn't. Even when I had followers on my jerkbait and I pitched back in the area where the fish came from, I never got a bite on the bottom, which told me they were totally prespawn."

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



A deep-diving jerkbait produced most of Martin's fish. He sewed up the win on day four by waking a Bomber Long A.

The Patterns

As Martin fished his way in and out and around dozens of points, drains and pockets, he began to see patterns with regard to how each species preferred to set up.

"The smallmouth bites usually came from the steepest sides – that real 'bluffy' stairstep rock," he says. "If it had an isolated tree on it, all the better."

"As I ventured farther into the pockets, the sides would flatten out just a little bit with a few more trees. That was spotted bass territory," Martin adds. "Then the largemouths seemed to prefer

the very back ends of the flatter drains that had just a few trees standing dead in the middle of the pocket. I didn't want a whole bunch of trees in the back of the pocket – just a few isolated ones."

Martin found that by mixing and matching the cadence of his jerkbait to the different types of species-related areas, he could catch all three brands of bass, which was a critical part of his winning strategy.

"Smallmouths and spots wanted it fast and erratic, so I sped up my presentations when going down the steep banks," he says. "Once I got into the back of a pocket, I would slow down and put long pauses in between my twitches because largemouths wanted the bait sitting still."

The only change Martin made to his program all week was on the final day when he tied on a wake bait.

"It got sunny, slick and still," Martin recalls. "Fish were following my jerkbait and not eating it. Once the sun got up and there was no shade in those pockets, those fish became really wary."

"I needed something that would help camouflage the bait. And then it hit me: a wake bait. I didn't even know if I had one in my boat. I dug around and found an old Bomber Long A with rusty hooks on it. I fixed it up with some new hooks, and it ended up being a clutch play because I caught a couple of my better fish on it that last day."

THE LAKE CUMBERLAND-BEAVER LAKE CONNECTION

During the week at Cumberland, Scott Martin was very vocal about how his many years of experience at Beaver Lake benefited him in Kentucky.

"Going to Beaver Lake so many years with FLW is really what taught me how to win this tournament," Martin remarks. "I know that sounds funny, but Beaver Lake is really the lake that taught me how to fish 'free,' how to fish new water every day, how to fish conditions and patterns."

Early in his career Martin classified himself as a "spot fisherman," only fishing spots where he had previous history of getting bites.

"I used to get killed at Beaver because I was always trying to fish places where I had bites before, and fishing like that just doesn't work there," he says. "Cumberland was very similar in that regard. I fished a lot of new water each day and had confidence doing it thanks to my Beaver Lake experience."

Martin's Beaver Lake experience also tipped him off to his winning move on the final day: switching to a wake bait.

"That wake bait deal is something I totally learned at Beaver Lake, too" Martin says. "Anytime it would get slick and sunny in the prespawn on Beaver Lake, a wake bait would really shine. Once I started seeing fish follow my jerkbait and not eat it over and over again [on day four at Cumberland], my gut told me to tie on a wake bait, and it produced several key fish for me on the last day."



Martin has now won eight tour-level events, which is the most all time.

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

TOP FIVE

NAME	HOMETOWN	WEIGHT	FISH	WINNINGS
1. SCOTT MARTIN	CLEWISTON, FL	60-01	20	\$125,200*
2. BARRY WILSON	BIRMINGHAM, AL	58-06	20	\$30,000
3. TERRY BOLTON	PADUCAH, KY	57-05	20	\$25,100
4. MATT REED	MADISONVILLE, TX	55-15	20	\$20,000
5. SCOTT CANTERBURY	SPRINGVILLE, AL	55-07	20	\$19,000

*Includes Ranger Cup

CLARK WINS CUMBERLAND CO-ANGLER CROWN

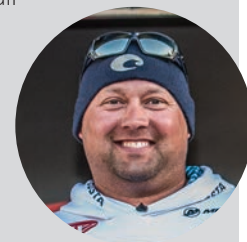
Despite losing what he estimates to be a 5-pound smallmouth in the final half-hour on Friday, Jeff Clark still managed to win the co-angler championship at Lake Cumberland with a 20-pound, 1-ounce two-day total.

Fishing with pros Kyle Weisenburger on day one and Kerry Milner on day two, Clark weighed in 10-15 and 9-2, respectively. He says he was prepared to fish a crankbait based on his practice days with pro Dylan Hays, but that changed on day one.

"The water Kyle was fishing was cleaner, so I threw a Megabass Vision 110 in western clown for the dingy water and Table Rock shad for the clean water," he says. "I caught four on that, and then it got kind of still, so I picked up a wacky-rigged worm and caught my fifth one."

On day two, Clark fished small main-lake points and pockets with a 4.3-inch Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbait in rainbow shad, but switched to a green pumpkin Keitech later in the day as the water dirtied up.

For Clark, who's in his co-angler rookie season, this is his first FLW victory. ■



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Winning Angler

Buddy Gross, Chickamauga, Ga.

Winning Weight: 64-11 (15 fish)

Stat Line: Gross is an FLW Tour pro whose strong suit is fishing deep vegetation with swimbaits. He used that combination to earn his first FLW Tour win on Lake Pickwick in May 2016 and again employed swimbaits in deep grass in March at Seminole for his first Costa FLW Series win.



CONDITIONS

Weather | post-frontal, clear and sunny

Air Temperature | highs in the 80s in practice, followed by a cold front and lows in the mid-30s, highs in the low 60s during the tournament

Water Temperature | mid-60s

Water Clarity | 1 foot in the rivers; 5 to 6 feet in Spring Creek

Wind | NE at 20 mph

Moon Phase | waxing crescent

Predominant Lake Features | flooded timber, various grasses, creek channels, ditches, ledges, ponds, broad flats

Fishery Type | lowland impoundment of some 37,500 acres in size, formed at the confluence of the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers and Spring Creek

Winning Baits

Gross used different combinations of swimbaits or soft jerkbaits and weighted hooks or heads to reach various depths and to give the baits different vibrations. His three primary combinations included a 5-inch Zoom Swimmer rigged on a 3/4-ounce Owner Beast Flashy Swimmer, which is a weighted hook with a belly spinner blade; a Zoom Magnum Super Fluke on a 3/4-ounce Tennessee River Tackle Tremor Head; and a

Zoom Super Fluke on a 1/2-ounce Tennessee River Tackle Tremor Head. All soft plastics were some sort of shad pattern or white, and all were fished on 17-pound-test Seaguar InvizX fluorocarbon.

Target Areas

Gross began his practice by flipping deep walls of hydrilla along the main channel in Spring Creek. Most of the deepest grass clumps and stalks grew up as tall as 14 or 15 feet off the bottom.

Due to the very mild winter, much of the deeper hydrilla was still green and healthy.

As Gross worked along the deep wall of hydrilla, he noticed several sharp "cuts" or "pockets" in the grass wall which were formed by small feeder ditches running into the main channel. Those "mini-drains" served as short avenues to a large spawning areas for balls of shad looking to get out of the main creek flow.

The combination constituted perfect staging areas for big female bass to hold up while waiting to move to spawning areas.

Presentation Keys

Gross marked the cuts and drains in the wall of hydrilla as he discovered them during practice.

"When I was flipping in practice, I kept feeling like my boat was right over the fish," Gross explains. "When I'd come to those cuts I could



see shad and fish arches on my Lowrance, suspended in those drains."

Gross then circled back to his waypoints, backed his boat far out into the channel and cast a swimbait up into the grass-lined drains.

"I wanted to see if I could get those suspended fish to bite a swimbait," he says. "And they certainly did. Those little ditches had timber right down the middle of them, which is where some of the bigger fish were suspended."

During the tournament, Gross alternated his three swimbait/jerkbait configurations, often slow-rolling the bigger baits (Zoom Swimmer and Mag Fluke) off the deepest clumps and through the timber. He used the smaller bait to fish the back ends of the cuts where the grass was more shallow.

Keys to Victory

Sticking to his strengths and a fortuitous warm winter, which kept a lot of green hydrilla intact, helped propel Gross to victory.

"I tried to go up shallow and fool around with catching bass off beds in practice, but it's just not my thing," Gross says. "I feel more comfortable fishing deep vegetation, so I kept hunting that kind of bite. That cold front [immediately before the tournament] may have helped me a bit, too, keeping those fish backed off and feeding on shad a few more days before running up on beds."

The healthy condition of the hydrilla helped Gross keep his baits clean while running through the grass.

"A lot of times I can't fish swimbaits in grass this early in the year because it's still dormant and clingy, gumming up the bait and keeping it from running right," Gross says. "But that deep hydrilla was still what I call 'crispy green,' letting me snap my bait out of it cleanly. I would count the bait down until it just touched the grass, and then I'd start reeling it over the top, popping it to keep it rolling clean without it gumming up and wasting a cast."

MOST OF THE TOP 10 FISHED SHALLOW

Buddy Gross might have won the Costa FLW Series event on Seminole fishing out in deeper hydrilla, but the majority of the rest of the top 10 focused on grass flats and sandbars in the 2- to 6-foot-deep zone where bass were moving up and spawning. Sight-fishing was difficult due to high winds, so many of the top finishers fished ChatterBaits, lipless crankbaits, Carolina rigs and lightly weighted soft plastics on the flats and bars.



Buddy Gross's cheering section included his daughter, Bella, his wife, LeAnn, and his mother, Elouise Gross.

CO-ANGLER CHAMPION

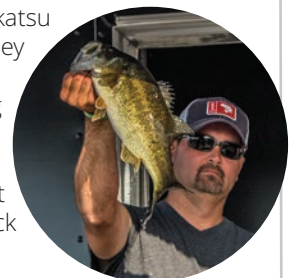
Name: Dwayne Fricks

Hometown: Starr, S.C.

Winning Weight: 33-03 (14 fish)

Winning Program: Fricks' primary lure all three days at Lake Seminole was a Zoom Super Fluke (pearl white) fished weightless over bedding flats. He rigged the Fluke on a 5/0 Gamakatsu hook tied to 15-pound-test Berkley Trilene line.

"The Super Fluke is just a big confidence bait for me, so that's what I used all three days," Fricks says. "I'd just cast it out, work it real slow and even just dead-stick it at times." ■

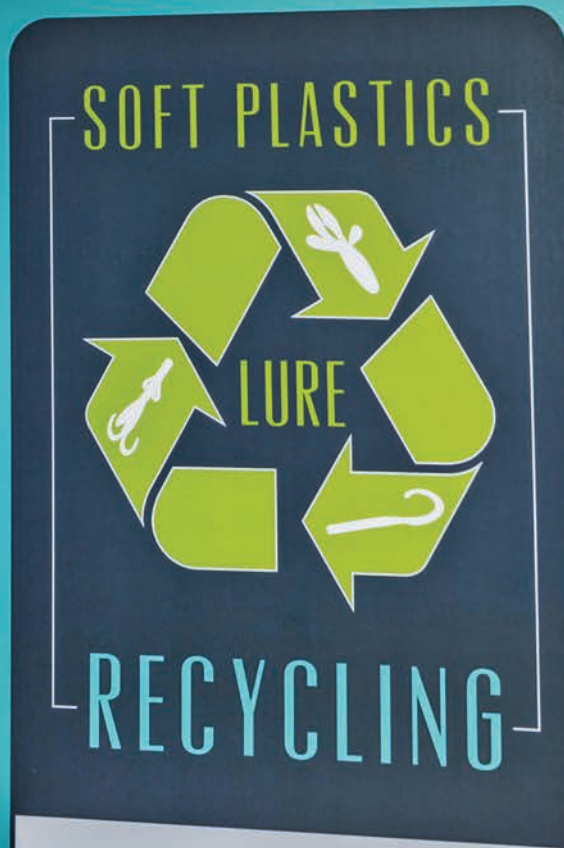




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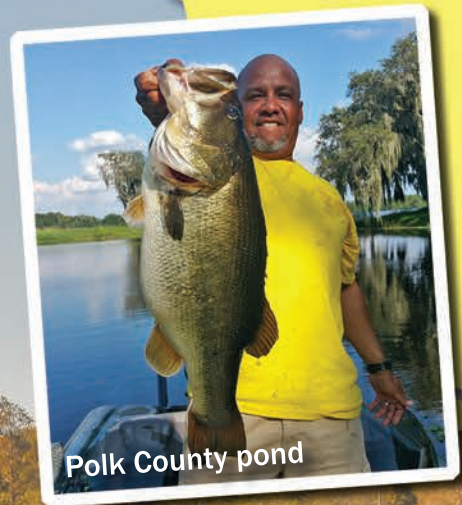
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DETAILS

March 30–April 1, 2017
Presented by T-H Marine
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and Promotions
Costa FLW Series Division: Central



LAKE DARDANELLE

RUSSELLVILLE, ARK.



Winning Angler

Quincy Houchin, Mabelvale, Ark.

Winning Weight: 45-04 (15 fish)

Stat Line: The Dardanelle tournament was Houchin's first foray into the Costa FLW Series. Houchin is known in Arkansas for his versatility in highland reservoirs and river systems. He thrives on shallow-water tactics that encompass the full range of bass behavior in close-quarter environments. His versatility with a frog has earned him the nickname locally as the "Frog Man." He's won three T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League Arkie Division tournaments.

CONDITIONS

Weather | pre-frontal and cloudy on day one; post-frontal, clear and sunny on days two and three

Air Temperature | highs in the 70s in practice, followed by a cold front and lows in the upper 40s, highs in the low 70s during the tournament

Water Temperature | 60 to 62 degrees

Water Clarity | 2 to 3 feet in sheltered backwaters

Wind | east at 25 mph

Moon Phase | waxing crescent

Predominant Lake Features | flooded timber, various grasses, creek channels, ditches, ledges, backwaters

Fishery Type | highland river impoundment; part of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System

Winning Baits

Houchin says he fished a Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver in green pumpkin/red flake with a 4/0 Trokar flipping hook most of the tournament. He also caught two key fish on a yellow/chartreuse Lucky Craft 2.5 square-bill crankbait. He used 25-pound-test Seaguar InvizX fluorocarbon with the Beaver and 15-pound-test Seaguar InvizX fluorocarbon for the crankbait.

Target Areas

Houchin targeted a large backwater in the upper, riverine portion of Lake Dardanelle, upstream from the Scranton Bridge and about 25 miles northwest of Lake Dardanelle State Park. Getting in required jumping sandbars, which dissuaded the rest of the competition from joining him. The backwater is one of the few prime spawning areas remaining in the upper part of Lake Dardanelle, where most of the backwaters have been cut off and silted in by the jetties and revetments that divert water into the navigation channel.

The banks are sandy with a variety of grades. Portions are steep, while others are level, and there's assorted wood cover in depths of 2 to 3 feet and 8 to 9 feet. Houchin's targets included blowdown trees of various sizes, as well as full treetops and scattered branches. Houchin caught his biggest fish off the smallest pieces of cover.

"Basically, I'm a target fisherman," Houchin says. "At first I pitched to wood underwater that I could see, and then I'd go to the deeper stuff."

Most of his targets were logs, but he paid equal attention to smaller branches, or "twigs" as he calls them, because they are often connected to tree crowns in deeper water.

"I caught some of my bigger fish by the twigs," Houchin says. "You really don't know what's under there. I just went through there flipping what I saw."



Houchin's primary tool was a Texas-rigged Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver.



Presentation Keys

Houchin employed a 7-foot, 4-inch, heavy-action Denali Lithium rod mated with a Team Lew's LITE Speed Spool LFS Series reel (7.1:1 gear ratio). The reel's fast retrieve and the stiff action of the rod were important for getting fish away from cover immediately upon the hookset, Houchin says.

He also credits his Costa Tuna Alley sunglasses for helping him see into the water and pick out cover that he otherwise might have missed. The Arkansas pro caught most of his fish early in the day, but he also managed to catch some in the deeper cover later when the sun was more directly overhead.

Though Houchin usually fishes along at a quick pace, at Dardanelle he slowed way down and picked apart every piece of cover.

On the final day, waves of about 2 feet crashing into the backwater took Houchin's tactic of flipping deep cover out of play, so he resorted to cranking with the Lucky Craft 2.5 square-bill.

Keys to Victory

Though Houchin led from start to finish, perseverance and one kicker fish caught late on the second day were the keys to his victory. Most of the fish Houchin boxed in his primary spot were essentially the same size, so he left that area around noon and fished other places in search of a backup. None

materialized, but a side trip into Illinois Bayou produced a 3-pound, 5-ounce bass that smacked the crankbait. That enabled Houchin to cull a 2-pounder, which boosted his weight by about a pound and a half.

If that fish had weighed a pound less, Houchin's final weight would have wound up at 44-4, or 5 ounces less than the stringer of runner-up Tom Silber.

"I was just killing time [when he caught the 3-5], but truthfully, that's the fish that won it for me," Houchin adds.

Houchin took the lead on day one with 19-12, but he had to settle for 14-1 on day two. Still in the lead, but with other anglers having gained ground on

him, Houchin was sorely tempted to fish another area on day three. He knew fish were still in his primary area, however, and he had no other place he could depend on to produce the bites he needed to win. Resigned to at least a top-five finish, he made one final bet on the place that put him in contention for the winner's paycheck of \$50,000.

Sticking with his original game plan, Houchin finished out the tournament in the backwater. His final-round catch was 11-7, though Houchin says that a 5- to 6-pound bass that swiped at the crankbait, but missed, at the boat would have pushed him into the 16-pound range.

CO-ANGLER CHAMPION

Name: Robert Bartoszek

Hometown: Hampshire, Tenn.

Winning Weight: 37-02 (14 fish)

Winning Program: A Lake Dardanelle veteran, Bartoszek relied on a junk-fishing approach that involved eight different baits in areas with diverse profiles and cover.

His most productive bait, however, was a SPRO Fat John square-bill (cell-mate color), which he threw with a 7-foot, medium-heavy Shimano Crucial rod, a Quantum EXO reel (7.3:1) and 15-pound-test Seaguar InvizX fluorocarbon. He used the square-bill to catch all five of his day-two keepers and two of the four keepers he had on day three.

"I like that stiffer rod with a square-bill because I'm throwing it around cover, and I like more backbone to get them away from cover," Bartoszek says. "That and the faster retrieve helped me more than anything because I think fish were reacting better to it." ■





BFL WINNING TACTICS

Arkie – Lake Greeson – March 18

Boater: Jake Ormond, Sterlington, La. – 15-14
Cranking the West Fork area with a Rapala DT-6 and Livingston Primetime SQ 2.0, and cranking the Little Missouri with a DT-6, Rat-L-Trap and XCalibur Xr75
Co-Angler: Buddy Rudolph, Hot Springs, Ark. – 10-4

Bama – Lake Mitchell – March 25

Boater: Josh Wissinger, Hayden, Ala. – 18-12
Swimming a Dirty Jigs No-Jack Swim Jig with a Zoom Ultra-Vibe Super Speed Craw around isolated main-lake grass patches, then targeting spawners around seawalls with a Z-Man ChatterBait and on flats with holes and boulders with a 1/4-ounce Buckeye Lures Spot Remover with a Reaction Innovations Flirt Worm
Co-Angler: Taylor Parker, Lake View, Ala. – 12-13

Bulldog – Lake Oconee – March 11

Boater: Jeremy York, Pompano Beach, Fla. – 20-9
Dragging a green pumpkin Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver around seawalls
Co-Angler: Harold Grizzle, Gainesville, Ga. – 15-9

Choo Choo – Lake Guntersville – March 18

Boater: Andy Parkinson, Dalton, Ga. – 23-4
Winding a BOOYAH One Knecker and shad-colored vibrating jig through a milfoil-lined ditch, and targeting lily pads with a black and blue swim jig with a Strike King Rage Craw trailer
Co-Angler: Paul Clayton, Cohutta, Ga. – 20-6

Choo Choo – Lake Guntersville – April 8

Boater: Dennis Barnes, Boaz, Ala. – 22-1
Fishing a Rat-L-Trap and swimbait around grass in the mid-lake area in 6 to 8 feet
Co-Angler: Jerry Armstrong, Shelbyville, Tenn. – 17-14

Gator – Lake Okeechobee – March 25

Boater: Jessie Mizell, Sarasota, Fla. – 23-0
Frogging lily pads with a red ear-colored SPRO Bronzeye Popping Frog
Co-Angler: Brandon Bartlett, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. – 19-9

Hoosier – Patoka Lake – April 8

Boater: Craig Carns, Noblesville, Ind. – 20-12
Fishing wind-blown points in areas with clean water using a swimbait and jerkbait
Co-Angler: Laiten McBrayer, Hobart, Ind. – 7-5

Mississippi – Ross Barnett – March 18

Boater: Corey Sullivan, Brandon, Miss. – 12-12
Fishing slow on points with a hard bottom using a black back/chartreuse Strike King square-bill, a junebug Zoom Lizard and a black and blue Strike King Hack Attack Jig
Co-Angler: Nick Churchill, Jackson, Miss. – 12-10

Mississippi – Pickwick Lake – April 8

Boater: Austin Weaver, Sheffield, Ala. – 20-5
Fishing an 8- to 9-foot-deep ditch in a flat upriver with a Zoom Trick Worm or Zoom Finesse Worm on a Johnson Lures shaky head
Co-Angler: Marty Wray, New Albany, Miss. – 14-1

Mountain – Dale Hollow – March 11

Boater: Robert Reagan, Byrdstown, Tenn. – 20-7
Fishing a custom green pumpkin jig and 1/2-ounce Strike King spinnerbait on mid-lake bluff transitions with chunk rock
Co-Angler: Dustin Jones, Stanford, Ky. – 15-4

Mountain – Dale Hollow – April 1

Boater: Tim Phy, Cookeville, Tenn. – 21-15
Dragging a D&L Tackle jig with a green pumpkin Strike King Rage Chunk or a beaver-style bait as a trailer in 2 to 6 feet of water on gravel points near grass beds
Co-Angler: Greg Trobaugh, Rickman, Tenn. – 17-3

Music City – Center Hill Lake – March 18

Boater: Tim Phy, Cookeville, Tenn. – 20-3
Casting a green pumpkin D&L Tackle jig to mid-lake gravel points in 8 to 10 feet of water
Co-Angler: Matthew Bouldin, Smithville, Tenn. – 17-8

North Carolina – Lake Wylie – April 1

Boater: Scott Hamrick, Denver, N.C. – 16-15
Skipping a Shooter Lures jig with a Zoom Super Chunk trailer under docks where postspawn bass were feeding on crappie
Co-Angler: Louis Kraft, Salisbury, N.C. – 12-0

Okie – Grand Lake – March 11

Boater: Derek Fulps, Broken Arrow, Okla. – 21-10
Working a molting craw-colored Elk River Finesse Jig around mid-lake docks and bluff ends in the morning, then cranking bluff ends with a Storm Wiggle Wart
Co-Angler: Chris Spence, Marlow, Okla. – 13-5

Okie – Arkansas River – April 1

Boater: Sean McAllister, Checotah, Okla. – 16-15
Fishing grass lines in the Kerr and Muskogee pools using a green pumpkin Zoom Brush Hog, a swim jig with a green pumpkin Strike King Rage Craw trailer and a War Eagle spinnerbait
Co-Angler: Nathan Christie, Claremore, Okla. – 15-4

Ozark – Lake of the Ozarks – March 25

Boater: Kyle Hulsey, Bourbon, Mo. – 25-5
Targeting 6- to 8-foot-deep drops along mid-lake channel swings with Bass Pro Shops Speed Shad swimbaits on an umbrella rig, a 1/2-ounce War Eagle spinnerbait as well as a 7/16-ounce Jewel finesse jig
Co-Angler: Eric Huntley, Lee's Summit, Mo. – 19-13

Ozark – Table Rock – April 8

Boater: Dustin Lippe, Lampe, Mo. – 16-5
Targeting staging areas in the lower end with a Luck-E-Strike Rick Clunn STX jerkbait, a peanut butter and jelly Bass-X football jig with a green pumpkin twin-tail trailer and an umbrella rig
Co-Angler: Alex Torkleson, Sand Springs, Okla. – 13-8

Piedmont – Kerr Lake – March 25

Boater: Kevin Chandler, London, N.C. – 20-14
Flipping and pitching a 1/2-ounce green pumpkin Shooter Lures jig to rocky areas in Grassy Creek and docks and laydowns in the main channel
Co-Angler: Larry Freeman Jr., La Crosse, Va. – 14-11

Savannah River – Lake Hartwell – April 1

Boater: Jayme Rampey, Liberty, S.C. – 22-0
Fishing a Zoom Super Fluke and a hitch-colored Zoom Swimmer swimbait on a Buckeye Lures J-Will Swimbait Head on points where herring were spawning
Co-Angler: Tony Everhart, Gaffney, S.C. – 13-13

Shenandoah – Smith Mountain Lake – March 18

Boater: Shane Burns, Durham, N.C. – 19-10
Targeting staging fish in points in pockets in Craddock Creek with a jerkbait and a green pumpkin Dave's Tournament Tackle football jig with a Dave's Tournament Tackle Sweet Tail Craw
Co-Angler: Elliot Pilson, Stuart, Va. – 9-11

Shenandoah – Kerr Lake – April 8

Boater: Danny Haire, Yadkinville, N.C. – 18-0
Carolina rigging a Zoom Lizard
Co-Angler: Craig Wright, Rustburg, Va. – 15-7

South Carolina – Santee Cooper – March 18

Boater: Bradford Beavers, Ridgeville, S.C. – 25-13
Fishing trees with a 1/2-ounce Chris-Mas-colored Katch-Her Lures Jig in the lake's upper end, and cranking stumps on flats in the lower end with a chartreuse sexy shad Strike King square-bill
Co-Angler: Charles Dickens, Appling, Ga. – 15-14

Volunteer – Norris Lake – March 18

Boater: Larry Neal, Piney Flats, Tenn. – 17-11
Fishing a hair jig in 20 feet of water in the mid-lake area
Co-Angler: Darren Kelly, Wartburg, Tenn. – 10-1



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DETAILS

College Fishing Open
Kentucky Lake/Lake Barkley
April 7-8, 2017
Hosted by Kentucky Lake CVB and Moors Resort & Marina



UT MARTIN HANGS TOUGH TO WIN KENTUCKY LAKE OPEN

By Colin Moore

PHOTOS BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

Winning Team

University of Tennessee at Martin
Matthew Lamastus and Dylan True

Winning Weight: 44-04 (10 fish)

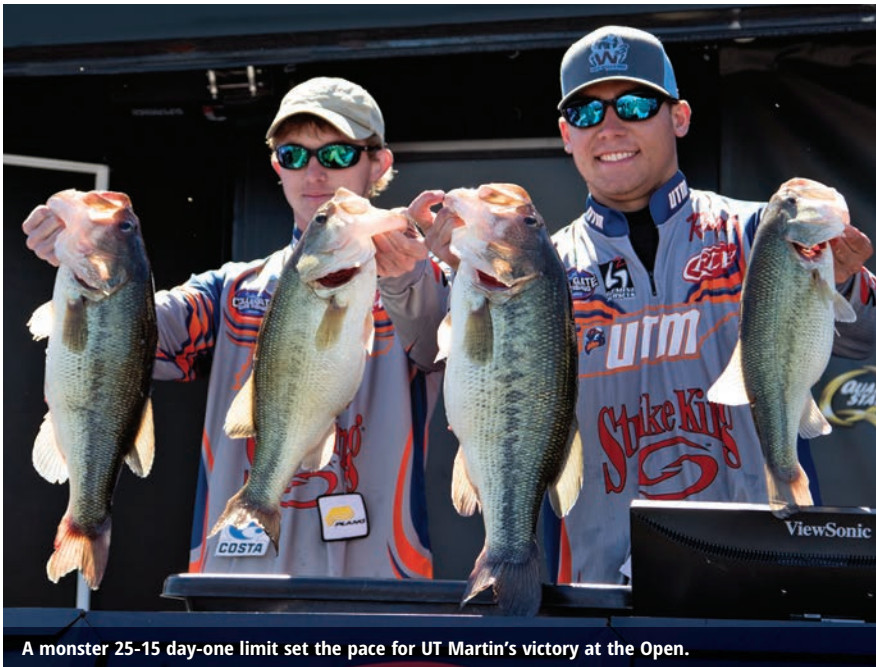
Stat Line: In only their second College Fishing event as teammates, True and Lamastus earned their first career win on Kentucky Lake.

Matt Lamastus and Dylan True of the University of Tennessee at Martin got while the getting was good April 7-8 in the YETI FLW College Fishing Open on Kentucky Lake. Buoyed by a 25-pound, 15-ounce limit in the first round, the two fashioned a two-day stringer of 44 pounds, 4 ounces to win the event ahead of 193 other teams. Their closest competitors were Koby Littrell and Martin McCravy of the University of North Alabama, who finished with 40 pounds, 8 ounces.

A cold front that swept across western Kentucky as the tournament began had a delayed negative reaction on the fishing that actually benefitted True and Lamastus. Several anglers boated their heaviest bass on day one, including the collegians from UT Martin. True caught his biggest, 7-14, on a Strike King Series 5 crankbait (sexy shad) that morning, and he and Lamastus also boated a couple of 6-pounders cranking the shoreline in massive Jonathan Creek.

Then the effects of a chill-down set in, and for the most part the bigger fish were nowhere to be found on day two. Seven 20-pounds-plus limits were weighed at Moors Resort & Marina – the tournament headquarters – on day one, but only two were seen in the championship round. Consequently, with a couple of exceptions, the teams at the top in the opening round tended to stay there on day two. UT Martin had 18-5, which was more than enough to stave off the hard-charging Littrell and McCravy, who returned with a 20-pound stringer – the day's second best.

A Murray State University team – Nick Montilino and Brock Spencer – looked to be in the best position to replace UT Martin on the leaderboard in the second round, but the bigger fish they flipped for with jigs on Friday in Lake Barkley's Little River had moved off the banks. They returned to the dock with a 15-12 sack, and, on the strength



A monster 25-15 day-one limit set the pace for UT Martin's victory at the Open.

CONDITIONS

Weather | post-frontal with bluebird skies and gusting wind on day one; cold in the morning but warming, with sunny skies on day two

Air Temperature | highs in the 70s in practice, followed by a cold front and highs in the lower 60s and lows in the upper 40s on day one; highs in the mid-70s and lows in the upper 30s on day two

Water Temperature | 63 to 68 degrees

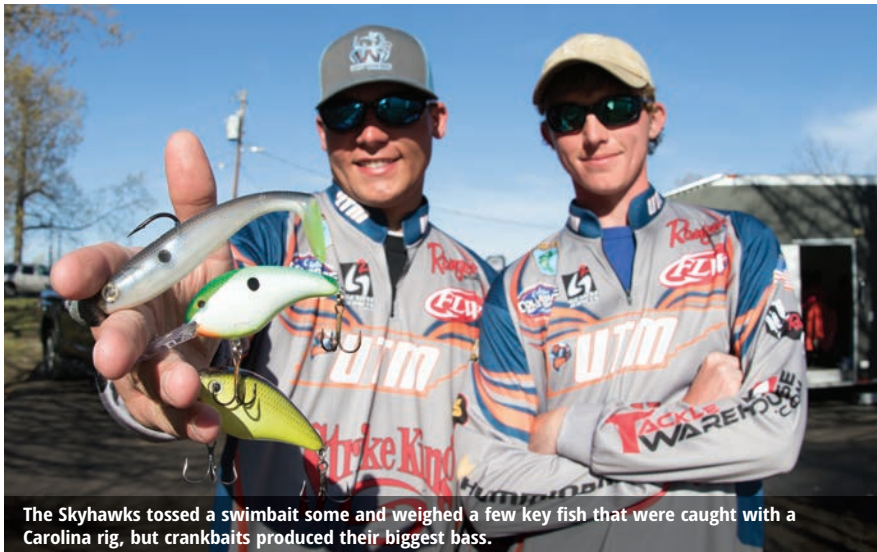
Water Clarity | 2 to 3 feet in backs of coves; 2 feet in the main lake and cove mouths

Wind | NNW at 8 to 15 mph on day one; SSE at 6 to 10 mph on day two

Moon Phase | nearly full

Predominant Lake Features | rocky banks, docks, ledges and bars, laydowns

Fishery Type | The last Tennessee River impoundment in the chain of lakes. Current is regulated by hydroelectric generating cycles at the dam. Large coves and feeder creeks on both sides of the lake are typical fishing hot spots in prespawn and postspawn.



The Skyhawks tossed a swimbait some and weighed a few key fish that were caught with a Carolina rig, but crankbaits produced their biggest bass.

of their day-one bag of 24-3, the Racers wound up third with 39-15.

"The pattern that we tried to run was fishing where the boat was in 8 or 10 feet of water, and we were a long cast away from a natural rock bank," recalls True, a junior agricultural business major. "There wasn't really anything special about the spots we fished. The bottom just came out gradually, and we threw crankbaits up there for the most part."

After nighttime temperatures dipped into the 30s between the first and second days, the heavier females apparently moved even farther offshore, and the reaction bite melted away. Even still, True caught a couple of keepers on a Strike King KVD 2.5 square-bill. Lamastus likewise contributed to the effort with a Strike King 2.5 in chartreuse with a black back.

"Saturday [the second day] we had to change up," says True. "There were so many crappie fishermen and bass fishermen along the banks in Jonathan that we figured it was time to go. The bass boats were basically doing what we had been doing, so we didn't think it would be too productive to fish behind them. Also, unless we slowed way down, we couldn't get bit. Everything just kind of stopped, not that they were eating it up Friday."

Abandoning Jonathan Creek, the Skyhawks ran south to the equally vast Blood River arm. There, they fished Carolina rigs dragging Strike King 6-inch Rage Lizards (green pumpkin) and wound up catching seven keepers overall.

"We really just couldn't get a bite," Lamastus says, explaining the switch from crankbaits to the excruciatingly slow Carolina rigs. "The second keeper we caught Saturday barely had the

crankbait by the back hook. That was the last crankbait keeper we had up until the very end, when we went to Jonathan again on the way back and I caught a 3 1/2-pounder to cull a 2-pounder."

For the most part, True and Lamastus employed G. Loomis or Hammer rods with Shimano baitcasters. They cranked with 12-pound-test

P-Line Halo fluorocarbon, and fished 20-pound test on the Carolina rigs.

"This was a real boost for our program," says True, UT Martin's club president. "We've got about 20 members now, and we went to Kentucky Lake with seven teams. So, we're making some progress and hope to show up at every college tournament we fish with teams that are capable of winning it all."

As champions of the 2017 Kentucky Lake Open, True and Lamastus won a Ranger Z175 bass boat equipped with a 90-hp Evinrude. They also took home various prizes provided by YETI, Costa, Plano and others. The total package is valued at more than \$30,000.

Per tournament rules, the top 20 teams qualified for the 2018 YETI FLW College Fishing National Championship. Several teams in the top 20 had already qualified for the 2018 championship in other tournaments prior to the Kentucky Lake Open, so YETI FLW College Fishing Director of Tournament Operations Kevin Hunt worked down the list clear to 30th place to determine the 20 qualifiers. ■

2018 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFIERS

1. Matthew Lamastus & Dylan True – UT Martin – 44-4 (10)
 2. Koby Littrell & Martin McCravy – University of North Alabama – 40-8 (10)
 3. Nick Montilino & Brock Spencer – Murray State University – 39-15 (10)
 - *4. Nathan Bell & Cole Sands – Bryan College – 36-12 (10)
 - *5. Bradley Devaney & Saxton Long – University of Tennessee – 35-5 (10)
 - *6. Austin Mize & Ethan Goodwin – University of North Alabama – 34-9 (10)
 7. Tyler Black & Ryan Winchester – Bethel University – 34-0 (9)
 8. Nicholas Czajka & Jack Hippe III – Adrian College – 33-10 (10)
 - *9. Brian Pahl & John Coble Garrett – Bethel University – 33-0 (10)
 10. Thomas Soileau & Hunter Freeman – Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe – 32-13 (10)
 11. Austin Elswick & Hunter Fulcher – University of Kentucky – 32-10 (9)
 12. Austin Butler & Ryan Kirkpatrick – Murray State University – 32-3 (10)
 - *13. Bradley Fleming & Evan Cook – Texas A&M – 31-13 (10)
 - *14. Tyler Rocke & Justin Schick – Illinois State University – 31-9 (10)
 15. Ben Wiley & Colin Bope – Ohio State University – 31-1 (10)
 - *16. Cole Floyd & Carter McNeil – Bethel University – 30-14 (9)
 17. Hunter Mills & Hunter McKinley – Murray State University – 30-13 (10)
 18. Thor Swanson & Mitchell Swanson – Bemidji State University – 30-11 (9)
 19. William Bond & Hunter Buice – University of South Carolina – 30-11 (10)
 20. Nick Ratliff & Luke Patterson – Campbellsville University – 30-7 (10)
 21. Conner Thompson & Dylan Pritchett – Bryan College – 29-14 (10)
 22. Ben Bates & Andrew Dawson – University of Tennessee – 29-6 (10)
 23. Jacob Miller & Jaycen Newsome – Ohio State University – 28-10 (10)
 - *24. Cody Stahl & Daniel Kennedy – Savannah College of Art & Design – 28-10 (10)
 25. Ryan Lancaster & Boris Muskoff – Murray State University – 28-9 (9)
 26. Joe Bardill & Luke Ripple – Murray State University – 28-7 (10)
 - *27. JT Russell & Jacob Louis – McKendree University – 28-1 (10)
 28. Tyler Robinson & Jack Kons – Bemidji State University – 28-0 (9)
 - *29. Dalton Wesley & Zach Hartnagel – SIU-Edwardsville – 27-15 (10)
 30. Will Miller & Ethan Ingle – University of South Carolina – 27-7 (9)
- *Qualified via previous College Fishing events.



YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING WINNING TACTICS

By Chad Love

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE – LAKE HARTWELL – MARCH 18

Bryan College team anglers D. J. Barber (right) of Gardendale, Ala., and Matt Brown of Corbin, Ky., used a “secret” red square-bill crankbait to sack a five-bass limit weighing 18 pounds, 14 ounces and win the YETI FLW College Fishing Southeastern Conference tournament March 18 on Lake Hartwell.

Barber, a business management sophomore, said a long run up the Seneca River to a pocket of dirty water they found during practice produced all their winning fish.

“After we pulled up, before I could even stand up and grab my rod, Matt caught a 6-pounder on his first cast,” says Barber.

“For the next 40 minutes we caught them on every cast,” adds Brown, a business marketing freshman. “We were throwing a red square-bill crankbait – I can’t share the name of it, though. It is an old Tennessee secret, and I have some old friends that would kill me if I shared it.”



CENTRAL CONFERENCE – LAKE OF THE OZARKS – APRIL 1



Umbrella rigs and bluff walls were the winning combination for the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater team of Jared Mataczynski (left) of Wausau, Wis., and Steve Nebel of Whitewater, Wis., at the YETI FLW College Fishing Central Conference tournament. The pair weighed in a five-bass limit worth 19 pounds, 5 ounces.

“The key for us was just trying something different,” says Mataczynski, a senior majoring in entrepreneurship. “A lot of the bluffs we were fishing did not have a ledge or a shelf, just a steep wall. We tried them anyway and managed to catch some good fish there.”

The team fished Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbaits on its umbrella rigs – the 3.8-inch model on the outside and a 4.8-inch bait with its tail dyed chartreuse in the middle.

“We wanted the bass to hit that bait [the middle one], because that had one of the three hooks allowed in it,” says Nebel, a senior business major. “We dipped the tail in chartreuse to differentiate it from the others.” ■

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Berkley Bouknight (left) and Jacob Wright – 16-14 (5 fish)
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ARKANSAS OPEN – LAKE HAMILTON – MARCH 25
Brady Gentry (left) and Kory England – 16-05 (5 fish)
Spring Hill High School – Hope, Arkansas



MISSISSIPPI OPEN – COLUMBUS POOL – MARCH 11
Matthew Bagwell (left) and Jordan Camp – 13-01 (5 fish)
West Point High School – West Point, Mississippi



TEXAS OPEN – LAKE O' THE PINES – APRIL 1
Joe Beebe (left) and Chad Mrazek – 24-11 (5 fish)
The Woodlands College Park High School –
The Woodlands, Texas

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TBF



WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

SOUTHERN SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS GET SETTLED

Even as northern venues were locked in ice, the Student Angler Federation's action-packed 2017 High School Fishing State Championship and Challenge schedule was kicking into gear in the South.

Florida State Championship

First, the Sunshine State was in the spotlight as Bailey Chisolm and Cole DePuy, representing the Osceola Anglers, topped the 57-boat field competing in

the Florida State Championship Feb. 26 on the St. Johns River.

Chisolm and DePuy put together a five-fish limit weighing 17-05 to take the crown. Kaitlyn Williams and David Daniel of the Okeechobee High School Brahms were second with a 15-13 limit, followed by James Brooks and Matthew Sorrells of the Fort Meade Fighting Miners in third with five bass and 15-9. Coy and Madison Givens of the Keystone Heights High School Indians claimed big bass honors

with an 8-14 behemoth, earning them a pair of high-performance reels.

Most of the anglers focused on fishing 3 to 6 feet of water, with a mixture of jerkbaits, finesse worms and vibrating swim jigs accounting for many of the bites. A total of 138 bass weighing 323 pounds, 6 ounces came to the SAF scale, including 21 limit catches. Five teams advanced to the High School Fishing National Championship.

Georgia State Championship

On Feb. 12, Cal Culpepper and Mason Waddell rose to the top of a 79-team field on West Point Lake to win the Georgia State Championship. Representing Georgia's Harris County High School, Culpepper and Waddell sacked a 12-10 limit. Hunter Parker and Daniel Parnes of Pickens High School were hot on their heels in second place with a 12-2 limit anchored by a 6-2 beauty that earned them the Big Bass Award. Greenbrier High School's Jacob Blumling and Coleman Johnson finished third with an 11-11 limit.

Bass were plentiful, but catching fish over the 14-inch minimum size requirement proved challenging. Still, 195 fish weighing a cumulative 330 pounds, 5 ounces crossed the stage, and 25 limits were recorded. A total of seven teams earned berths in the national championship.



Bailey Chisolm (left) and Cole DePuy.



Mason Waddell (left) and Cal Culpepper.

Hartwell Early Bird Challenge

Tyler Christy and Scott Springer bested the 67-boat field battling in the Cabela's Lake Hartwell Early Bird Challenge Feb. 19. The pair weighed in an 18-01 limit, which included a 5-pounder that won the Big Bass Award.

Devildog Anglers' Jacob Smith and Hunter Harrison landed in second with a limit of 13-11, followed by Cole and Karston Hopson of Rivers Academy Elite with five fish for 12-11. In all, 176 bass weighing 341-08 were brought to the scale, including 19 limits.

For additional information on the Student Angler Federation's High School Fishing program, please visit their website at highschoolfishing.org.



Tyler Christy (left) and Scott Springer.

NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS SEASON WRAPS UP

The final qualifiers for the 2017 The Bass Federation National Championship were decided Feb. 18-19 when the 2016-2017 National Semi-Finals season wrapped up. The District 23 showdown involved TBF members from Arizona and California competing on Lake Havasu out of Lake Havasu Marina.

Arizona's Charlie Crawford stormed out of the gate on day one, sacking an 18-01 limit to grab a solid lead on the boater side of the event. Fellow Grand Canyon State boaters Max Hernandez and Chris Cook were next on the leaderboard with 17-12 and 13-09, respectively. Arizona's Richard Vizcarra paced the co-anglers with an 11-05 limit.

On day two, Crawford struggled a bit to fill his livewell and ended up with four bass for 11-06, but it was enough to carry him to victory with a 29-07 total. He earned a slot in the 2017 TBF National Championship and \$1,690 for his efforts, not to mention serious Southwestern bragging rights for at least a year.

California's George Fedor climbed from fourth on day one to second in the final round with 25-04. Fedor, who was the only boater in the field to box a limit both days, also claimed a trip to the championship, plus \$870. Californian Robin Oh rose to top the co-anglers with a total weight of 20-07. In seventh place, California's Bryan Kurata claimed the \$500 Ranger Cup award for being the highest-finishing boater registered for that popular contingency program.

The Arizona Bass Federation took home the first District 23 State Pride Award with 78-03. The award is determined by adding the weights of four boaters and co-anglers from each state, who are selected prior to the event. Overall, a total of \$9,480 in cash and prizes, representing a 131.5 percent payback, were awarded in the boater and co-angler divisions.

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

The new format pays back 100 percent of entry fees, including 75 percent to the top 20 percent of the field, 10 percent to the state federations and 15 percent to the TBF National Championship.

For details, visit bassfederation.com.



District 23 winner Charlie Crawford weighed in a mixed bag at Lake Havasu.

STATE FEDERATION SPOTLIGHT: THE IDAHO BASS FEDERATION

It's no secret that The Bass Federation members around the country share a passion for bass fishing. To fully appreciate the level of commitment state federations and local clubs bring to the table, a closer look at what's happening within the organization around the country is warranted.

Toward that end, TBF is launching a series of articles highlighting individual state federations. We begin with a look at The Idaho Bass Federation (TIBF), as TIBF President Tammy Shuyler answers questions that shed more light on how TBF members are making a difference on behalf of all bass anglers.



TBF of Idaho President Tammy Shuyler (right) with Forrest and Nina Wood.

Q: What are some of the things you'd like fellow TBF members (and non-members) to know about The Idaho Bass Federation, such as some of the projects or events you have going on for this year?

A: TBF has always been active with the youth and promoting youth programs. The numbers have fluctuated over the years, but our youth director reports that interest grew last year and the trend continues headed into 2017, with lots of excitement and buzz about the upcoming championship.

Idaho TBF has also had a strong focus on conservation, and our goal is to conduct at least one project per year. Working jointly with Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), we have improved fish habitat with structure plants in various waters, and helped rebuild the IDFG release boat utilized by all the clubs for catch-and-release following the tournaments.

We donated funds in January 2017 to purchase five tagging devices at a cost just under \$1,000 for a smallmouth bass survey underway on the Snake River in southern Idaho. We are also working on a project to create signage to educate the public about the life of a bass and importance of catch-and-release. It is our goal to have one conservation project per year.

With the TBF National Semi-Finals format change, our tournament director, Eddie Garcia, and the board have created a statewide tournament qualifier schedule this year to encourage member participation across the state. We are hopeful our participation numbers will maintain and grow with the increased ability for participation. A lot of strategic thought and planning went into this year's schedule, and we hope that we will see another strong turnout from our membership this year to fish the state qualifier circuit. We also held our annual TBF Banquet Feb. 18, which was a very successful fundraiser and kickoff to our tournament fishing season.

Q: How many tournaments does The Idaho Bass Federation run each year?

A: Our state schedule includes four one-day qualifying tournaments leading up to a two-day season championship in July. Top finishers from the championship move on to the 2017 Idaho/Montana Semi-Finals at Noxon Reservoir, Mont. We also conduct special activities, including an annual Military Appreciation Tournament for armed forces personnel, and assist with the "Scales of Justice," an event in which youths within the juvenile court system get to fish a tournament with volunteer boaters.

Q: What are some of the challenges you've faced?

A: The recent economic recession was the worst ever seen in Idaho. It was hard to see many of our friends and membership make the choice to stop fishing or scale back through no fault of their own, due to the lack of financial means to fish. The reality of owning a boat, paying for fuel and maintenance, and purchasing the tackle and gear to bass fish is that it is expensive.

In response, the state board is in the process of developing funding to continue assisting the anglers to help meet their travel expenses. Developing sponsor relationships following the economic downturn is ongoing and crucial as well. Many of our past sponsors are no longer in business, and we are seeking to build new connections with our community and state sponsors.

Q: How have members responded to the new National Semi-Finals system?

A: Overall, they like it. Some miss competing against multiple states, but reducing travel costs and expenses with the new Semi-Finals format makes sense. Members also appreciate the chance for more anglers to compete past the state level at the Semi-Finals. 2016 was our first year, and folks are excited to be fishing the 2017 state qualifiers this year.

I feel good that we are handling the format change the best way possible with the help from the TBF national office. I look forward to a postseason review and considering any adjustments needed to facilitate participation at the state level.

Q: Do you have advice for other state federations hoping to grow their membership and tackle new conservation, youth or community projects?

A: Keep it simple. Do the job well with integrity and passion, no matter whether holding a tournament, fundraising or participating in a community event. Volunteers are the backbone of this organization. They may have limited time and resources, but will continue helping as long as they feel their time and energy are well spent and appreciated.

Q: Any other thoughts in closing?

A: We appreciate what the national TBF and FLW do for the states, and know how much time and energy is spent maintaining the sponsor connections, keeping the membership engaged and providing for the organization.

Thank you TBF and FLW for promoting and supporting our passion for Idaho bass fishing.

SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT

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

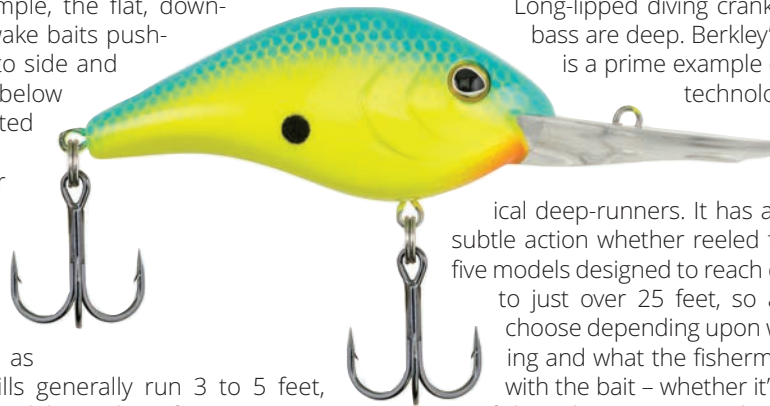
HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT CRANKBAIT FOR MORE BASS

There's no denying the fact that crankbaits catch bass. But as The Bass Federation members have proved time and again at tournaments across the country, choosing the right lure to match the mood of the fish and conditions is critical. It can mean the difference between taking the stage with a winning sack or sulking back to the dock with an empty livewell.

Color, size and profile play key roles in crankbait selection, but they're not the only factors that contribute to success. Anglers provide the locomotion by cranking, but the lip, or bill, generates wiggling, rolling and diving dynamics key to getting the lure in the strike zone and eliciting strikes.

One look at the bill's size and shape tells you a lot about what a lure will do. For example, the flat, downward-facing lip common on wake baits pushes the lure's head from side to side and causes it to swim at or just below the surface with an exaggerated wobble.

Square-bill designs offer another option for fishing a little deeper. They typically generate a searching motion complemented by plenty of action, and will excel when bounced off hard cover such as stumps and rocks. Square-bills generally run 3 to 5 feet, though some deep-running models reach 20 feet or so.



Circuit-board and coffin-style bills are also masters of deflection, but are thinner and more flexible than the diving lips on most square-bill baits, so they deflect a bit differently. Thanks to their unique lips designs, coffin-bills careen off to the side of woody cover, then return to their original action. Coffin styles also tend to run a bit deeper, with a tighter action than square-bills.

Scatter-style lips, which are cupped, cause a crankbait to swim off to one side or the other, producing an erratic "hunting" action. You'll find models covering a variety of depth ranges, and the trick with all is not to overwork the bait. A pause here and there is fine, but other than that, let the lip do the work.

Long-lipped diving crankbaits are a factor when bass are deep. Berkley's new-for-2017 Dredger is a prime example of the latest in crankbait technology. The 2 1/4- to 3 1/4-inch Dredger has a smaller profile, yet dives faster than typical deep-runners. It has a weighted bill and tight, subtle action whether reeled fast or slow. It comes in five models designed to reach different depths from 10 to just over 25 feet, so an angler can pick and choose depending upon where the bass are holding and what the fisherman wants to accomplish with the bait – whether it's running just above the fish, timber or grass, or bumping off the bottom.

Berkley's new Dredger lets you quickly put a small-profile hard bait in deep strike zones.

SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS FEATURED ON *FEDERATION ANGLER TV*

High School Fishing fans who are considering attending this year's High School Fishing World Finals June 27-July 1 on Pickwick Lake should review *Federation Angler TV's* coverage of last year's event on the Pursuit Channel to get a feel for what to expect.

On Tuesday, June 20 at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m., and on Saturday, June 24 at 8 a.m., watch as 400 of bass fishing's most talented young guns battle for top honors on Pickwick and Wilson lakes out of Florence, Ala., in the 2016 High School Fishing World Finals.

Federation Angler TV also airs exciting action from other TBF and SAF events throughout the year. For complete listings, air times and details, visit pursuitchannel.com. ■



Watch Kentucky's Peyton Porter and Coleton Jennings in action at the 2016 High School Fishing World Finals on *Federation Angler TV* in June.



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JAY KENDRICK

Grant, Ala.

By Sean Ostruszka

How do you go from being a nurse anesthetist to a professional angler?

Actually, I'm both. I'd say half my year is spent doing anesthesia, and the other half is spent fishing or doing things for sponsors. It's a dual career, really, and each suits the other well.

They do?

Oh, yeah. I didn't get into anesthesia by accident. I knew a long time ago that I was going to be a professional fisherman. So I needed a career that would allow me the freedom and financial wherewithal to do that. Anesthesia was it.

How long ago are we talking?

Over 30 years. I was probably 14 or 15.

I have this image of you in high school breaking down spreadsheets of potential careers instead of doing homework.

That's not that far off. I did a lot of research, and I couldn't find another profession that interested me, had the earning potential and had the freedom to work my schedule around fishing.

Ever regret that decision when you were taking those medical exams?

Not at all. It was a lot of schooling, but it's paid off. Some think my road to

being a pro fisherman has been easy, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I've scratched and clawed and had a dogged determination to stick with my plan. I'll admit there was some frustration with how long it took, but I took the best road I knew of.

What can you take from an operating room that's applicable to a fishing tournament?

Preparation. Before a patient comes into an operating room, I spend 15 minutes setting up my tools, the medicines. I don't want to waste time. My boat is the same way. Everything is strategically positioned. This way if I need a spinnerbait, I know exactly where it is, how many I have available onboard, and in what weights and colors.

So, you dreamed your entire life of being a professional fisherman. What was that first tournament at the professional level like?

I don't want to come off cocky or overconfident, but I don't remember having that feeling like I'd made it or anything. I never doubted I would. It was just a matter of time. Just like I have no doubt I'll win an FLW Tour event. It's just a matter of time, though I think that's close.

You certainly looked like you might win at Guntersville. You had the lead on the first day, but it kind of fell apart on day two. I have to ask, what happened?

I'd predetermined before the event I was solely going to fish for big fish. So I knew day two was going to make or break everything. I had a 3-pound lead, and if I got five big bites, I'd have a 10-pound lead. No one was going to catch me then. It just didn't happen.

Have you second-guessed yourself since?

I haven't, but I've had so many buddies call me up and say, "Why didn't you just go to the grass, catch a limit and make the cut?" I told them I wasn't concerned about making the cut. I was just focused on winning.

Was it because it was Guntersville – a lake you'd won on before – or do you always fish that way?

I used to fish more conservatively, but the older I've gotten, the more I've been willing to fish for the win. You don't win fishing conservatively. Besides, I tell my buddies there's not much difference in money between finishing fifth or 50th. So you might as well fish to win. There's a big difference there. ■



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