



BASS

OCTOBER
2017

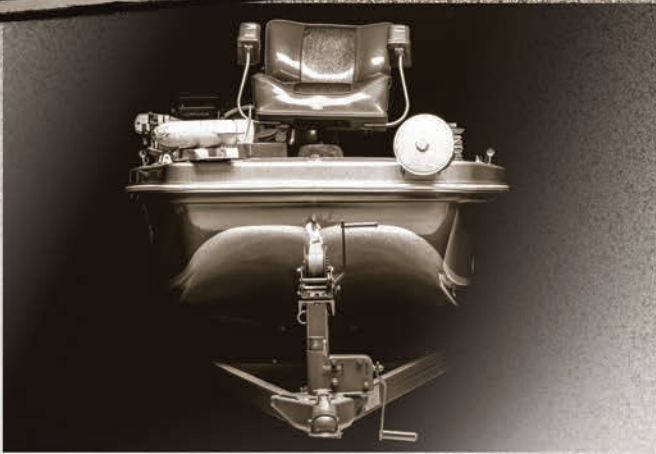
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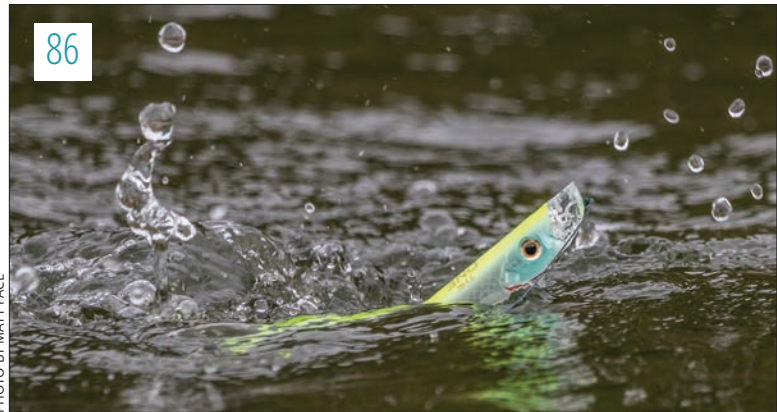


PHOTO BY MATT PACE

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FLW Bass Fishing (ISSN 1543-6179) is published eight times per year (January, February/March, April, May/June, July, August/September, October, November/December) by FLW, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. Periodicals Postage Paid at Benton, KY, and at additional mailing office. Rates: one year (8 issues) \$25.00; two years (16 issues) \$50.00; three years (24 issues) \$75.00.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *FLW Bass Fishing*, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. For questions regarding your subscription call 270.252.1000 Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. CST.

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EDITOR'S NOTE



THE *FLW LIVE* EFFECT

Since *FLW Live* launched earlier this year, fans have gained more access to what goes on in an FLW Tour pro's bass boat than ever before. I hope you've been watching, and I hope you tuned in during the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup, because it was the most exciting three days of fishing to air so far on the *FLW Live* program. From Anthony Gagliardi's 6-pounder within minutes of the day-one takeoff to Justin Atkins' final-day flurry for the win, it was a nonstop hawfgfest. And don't worry if you missed it because you can still watch the entire show on FLW's YouTube page.

What's striking about the *FLW Live* program is how quickly it has caught on, and how it is not only changing the spectator experience, but at times the pros' angling experience.

While pros aren't allowed to follow the show while they're fishing, and FLW's marshals can't relay to their assigned pros what's happening with the rest of the field, sometimes it's unavoidable that a pro will pick up on what's happening on the show.

For instance, on the final day of the Cup, South Carolina favorite Brandon Cobb began the day with the lead. Shortly after takeoff he'd amassed an armada of some 60 spectator boats. Gradually throughout the morning, the conversations and reactions from members of his gallery got louder as they watched on *FLW Live* as Cobb's main competition, his Tour buddy Atkins, put on a show.

Cobb says he didn't know for sure what was happening – he was too focused on fishing to hear what his gallery was discussing – but he definitely noticed a change mid-morning when the crowd dwindled by about half as spectators left him and ran to watch Atkins and Travis Fox, who was also having a big morning. He eventually saw some of his former followers with Fox and put it all together.

Did the realization that his competitors were catching fish change Cobb's approach? Not at all. Cobb knew he was on the best program to potentially win, and he was dialed in. Plus, despite spending only a few years on Tour, 27-year-old Cobb is remarkably levelheaded. He just doesn't get riled up – the result of many years of tournament experience already, thanks to his FLW College Fishing and BFL background.

Still, the spectator shift did impact the tournament. Cobb struggled at times to direct traffic around his best cane piles, and each time he changed spots some of the boats ran over his fish – fish that he planned to come back to later – and delayed the fish from setting back up on the cane piles he was fishing. The traffic eventually threw off his timing. When his crowd dwindled, it helped Cobb, but was too late.

Conversely, Atkins began the day with only a handful of spectators. By the time Cobb's crowd got to Atkins, he'd already sacked up most of his weight, so the additional fans simply served to get him even more fired up as he put the finishing touches on his championship.

It was a minor storyline this time, but I promise the "*FLW Live Effect*" is another factor that pros will need to learn to manage as the show continues to gain popularity.

In the meantime, I'll keep watching to see how the sport's best pros execute their craft, and I hope you will, too. And I want to offer my congratulations to the crew that made *FLW Live* possible for a great first season, including FLW Senior Content Manager Jesse Schultz, *FLW* television producer Peyote Perryman, hosts Travis Moran and Rob Newell, Network Engineer Doug Chessor, Operations Engineer and Mobile Promotions Manager Dave Likens, Mobile Promotions Administrator Bobbie Likens, Mike Auten's crew at Commonwealth Productions, and all of the cameramen and support staff who made it possible.

Kudos, and thanks for taking us all on this ride.

Curtis Niedermier, Editor-in-Chief

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FISHING EXPOSED
LAKE MURRAY — AUGUST 13, 2017





A NEW RECORD CROWD

Fishing fans packed the Colonial Life Arena in downtown Columbia, S.C., for the final weigh-in of the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup and watched Justin Atkins get crowned a champion. In fact, they showed up in droves throughout the Cup's three days, setting a new attendance record in the process. Total attendance at takeoffs, the Cup Expo and weigh-ins for three days was 68,315, which broke the previous record of 65,172 that was set at the 2014 Cup in Columbia.

PHOTO BY MATT PACE



FISHING EXPOSED
LAKE MURRAY — AUGUST 13, 2017



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LIVE FROM LAKE MURRAY

There might have been some secrets among the pros fishing on Lake Murray before the Forrest Wood Cup got started, but by the end of day one, most fishing fans were well aware of what was going on in the tournament. That's because FLW broadcast all three days of competition via *FLW Live*. Each day's show kicked off at Dreher Island State Park with a special morning broadcast where hosts Chris Jones and Byron Velvick interviewed anglers, local dignitaries and other special guests. Here, fans huddle around the hosts before the final day's takeoff. In all, the 2017 Cup was the most viewed championship in FLW history, validating live broadcast as the modern standard for tournament coverage.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

JAY KENDRICK RECEIVES SPORTSMANSHIP AWARD

Grant, Ala., pro Jay Kendrick was presented with the Forrest L. Wood Sportsmanship and Community Leadership Award during the annual pre-tournament banquet at the Forrest Wood Cup. Kendrick, a full-time nurse anesthetist, arranged visits to local hospitals in each of the host communities along the 2017 FLW Tour trail. He was joined at each stop by fellow anglers Jimmy Reese and Billy Hines, along with other pros when possible. Although the anglers visited with patients at each hospital, they made it a point to spend time with the hospital staff, particularly the non-patient care staff such as those in the housekeeping, maintenance and security departments.

"They don't get to interact a lot with patients," Kendrick says. "They very rarely get a nod of acknowledgement. I like to thank them for their hard work and dedication for taking care of their patients and community, even though a lot of what they do goes unseen. I tell them we understand what you do, and we know that you do it behind closed doors a lot of times, and you don't get a lot of appreciation for that."

At each visit, Kendrick arranged for hospital employees, visitors and patients to check out a couple of fully rigged Ranger bass boats. He presented goody bags to patients, and organized raffles with items such as Duckett reels, Ranger hats, YETI tumblers and Costa sunglasses. ■



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Stop #2
HARRIS CHAIN
LEESBURG, FL
2/22 - 2/25

Stop #3
LAKE LANIER
GAINESVILLE, GA
3/08 - 3/11

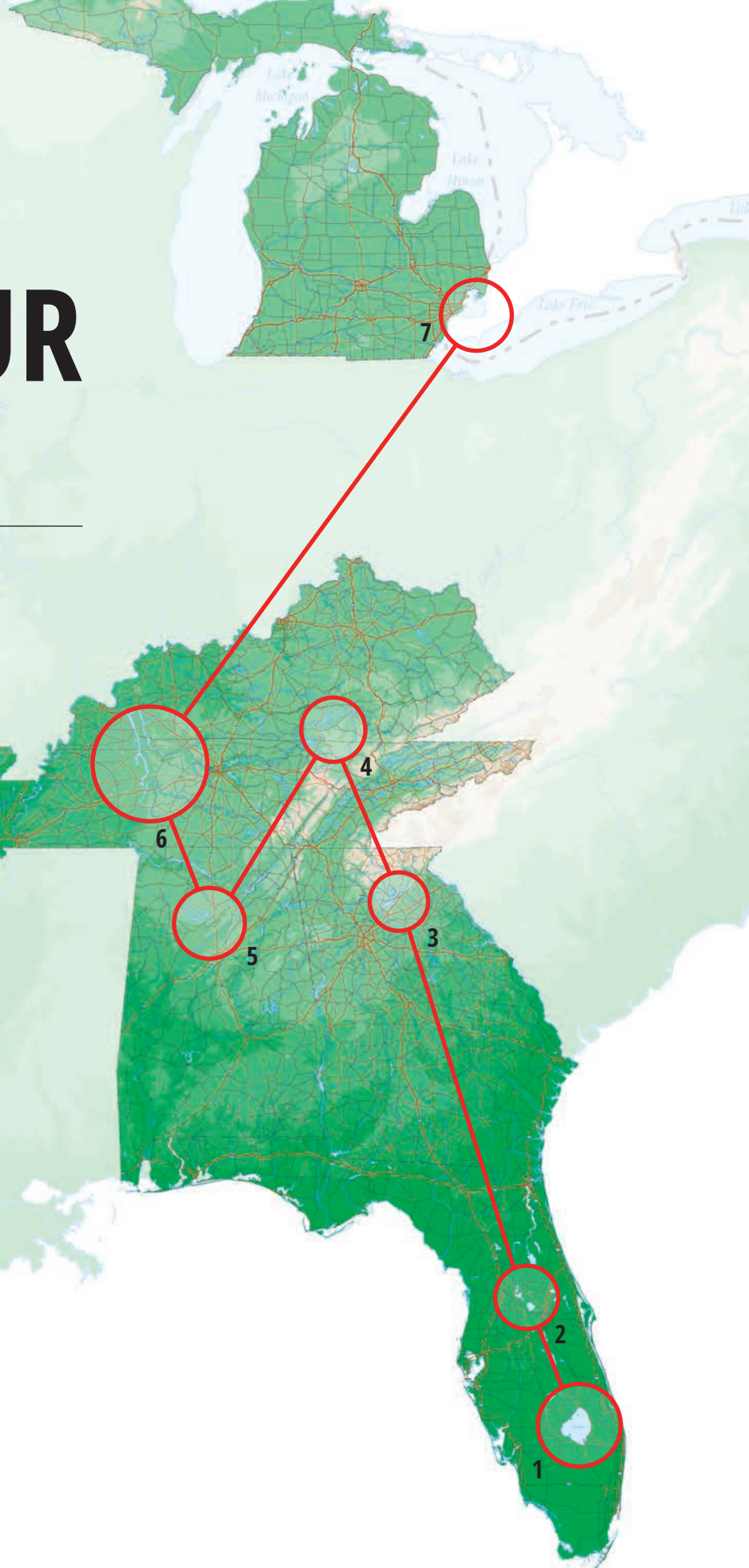
Stop #4
LAKE CUMBERLAND
BURNSIDE, KY
4/12 - 4/15

Stop #5
SMITH LAKE
JASPER, AL
4/26 - 4/29

Stop #6
KENTUCKY LAKE
GILBERTSVILLE, KY
5/17 - 5/20

Stop #7
LAKE ST. CLAIR
HARRISON TWP., MI
6/28 - 7/01

Forrest Wood Cup
LAKE OUACHITA
HOT SPRINGS, AR
8/10 - 8/12



2018 COSTA FLW SERIES SCHEDULE

CENTRAL DIVISION

Table Rock Lake, Branson, Mo.

4/19 - 4/21

Lake Barkley, Cadiz, Ky.

6/7 - 6/9

Lake of the Ozarks, Osage Beach, Mo.

10/11 - 10/13

NORTHERN DIVISION

Lake Champlain, Plattsburgh, N.Y.

6/21 - 6/23

Lake Erie, Buffalo, N.Y.

7/26 - 7/28

1000 Islands, Clayton, N.Y.

9/6 - 9/8

SOUTHEASTERN DIVISION

Lake Okeechobee, Okeechobee, Fla.

1/4 - 1/6

Lake Seminole, Bainbridge, Ga.

3/1 - 3/3

Santee Cooper, Summerton, S.C.

4/5 - 4/7

SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION

Sam Rayburn, Jasper, Texas

2/15 - 2/17

Grand Lake, Grove, Okla.

3/22 - 3/24

Fort Gibson Lake, Wagoner, Okla.

10/4 - 10/6

WESTERN DIVISION

Lake Havasu, Lake Havasu City, Ariz.

2/8 - 2/10

Clear Lake, Lakeport, Calif.

5/10 - 5/12

California Delta, Bethel Island, Calif.

9/27 - 9/29

COSTA FLW SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Lake Guntersville, Guntersville, Ala.

11/1 - 11/3

THRIFT WINS RANGER CUP PRIZE

FLW Tour Angler of the Year Bryan Thrift was presented with a certificate for a new Ranger Z518C with a 200-hp Evinrude outboard by Ranger Boats Senior Marketing Manager/Promotions Scott Arms at the Forrest Wood Cup pre-tournament banquet for being the highest-finishing Ranger Cup angler on the FLW Tour in 2017. Other anglers who earned Ranger Cup prizes for their season-long performance were Jeff Sprague (\$10,000), David Dudley (\$8,000), Cody Meyer (\$7,000) and Shane LeHew (\$5,000).

Since 2000, the Ranger Cup contingency program has paid out about \$17.5 million in prize money.

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



RANGER, FLW EXTEND PARTNERSHIP

FLW also announced at the Forrest Wood Cup that it had reached an agreement with Ranger Boats to extend the sponsor partnership between the two companies. It's the longest-running such sponsorship in the bass tournament industry.

SOUTH CAROLINA MAN WINS FANTASY FISHING POINTS TITLE

Gary McGlohorn of Batesburg, S.C., is \$10,000 richer after winning the season-long points title for FLW Fantasy Fishing. He also won the Mississippi River Fantasy Fishing top prize back in May, which earned him \$5,000.

"I started playing FLW Fantasy Fishing five or six years ago, but this is the first year I stayed with it through the entire season," says McGlohorn. "I had a rough start, but after three good tournaments I was back in it. That's why it's important to play all the way through the season. It only takes a few good finishes to be back in the running for some big money." ■



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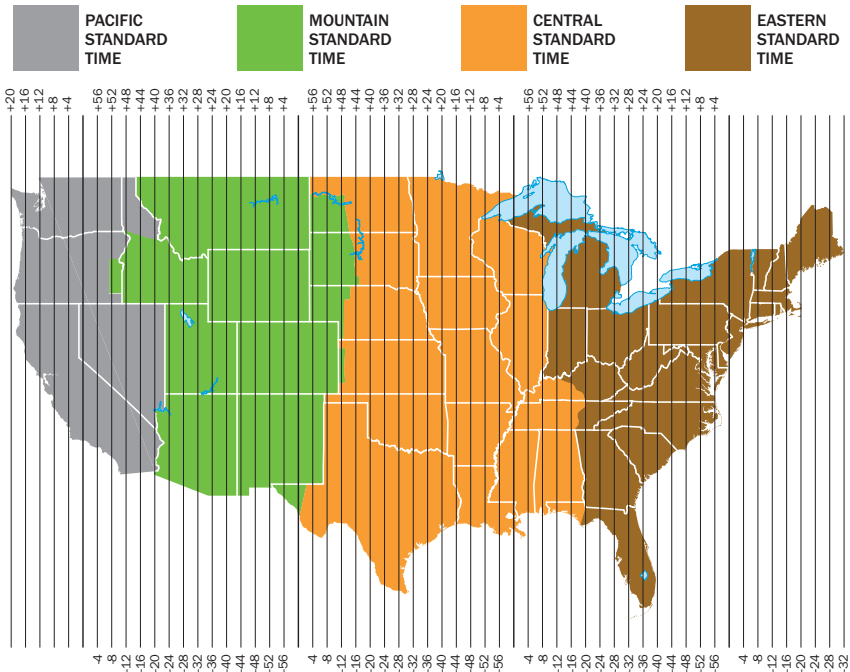
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OCTOBER 2017



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

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



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ROB NEWELL

It's All About "We"



A friend of mine, who has been out of the bass tournament scene for nearly a decade, recently watched a few tournament weigh-ins online and came away with an interesting question.

"Why do all these pros say 'we' on stage?" he asked. "I thought pro fishing was an individual sport."

My buddy is right. Many years ago bass pros would get on stage and often describe their fishing day in first-person singular case: "Well, I made a long run up the river. When I got there, I picked up a jig, and I caught a big one on the first pitch."

But these days weigh-in stage talk has a much more plural vibe to it, as in, "Well, we had a great day. We got a limit early, which allowed us to go fish some new water. Then another school came up right in front of us, and we dropped the hammer on them. Hopefully, we can do it again tomorrow."

So – as my buddy points out – if there is a marshal in the boat who is not allowed to fish the last two days and just one person is actually fishing, who are all these other people who also get to "drop the hammer?"

It's a great observation that has made me acutely aware of pronoun usage on stage these days. And I must say that "we" is rampant – but I understand why. When you stop and think about it, the two pronouns are virtually interchangeable in our sport.

Not including local team events, pro bass fishing was once strictly viewed as a competition between individuals. The early pioneers of professional bass fishing often traveled the circuits alone with little support other than a "good luck" over a long-distance call on a pay phone.

By comparison, tournament fishing in the modern era has become much more of a team sport. For starters, the word "team" became a big part of the pro fishing vernacular during the height of FLW's "team deal" days, when earning a spot on a "sponsor team" became an esteemed accomplishment. That was followed by the successful FLW College Fishing program, which adopted a team format.

Over the last 15 years or so, many of the young pros who have entered the sport through FLW's tremendous gateway to competitive fishing have become far more comfortable with the team concept than their predecessors.

These days, however, the real source of the team "feel" in professional fishing is family. Now, more than ever, families throw their unwavering support behind anglers trying to launch pro fishing careers.

Anxious moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers and cousins fill the stands at events and sit through long weigh-ins in all kinds of weather to support the cause. The wives who have learned how to back a bass boat down a dark ramp in the early morning darkness are a huge part of

bass anglers' supporting casts as well. In some cases, wives have become business managers for their husbands' pro careers.

And the team doesn't stop there. Non-endemic sponsor relationships are also more intense than they used to be. Companies that sponsor pros now take a personal interest in how "their" pros are doing.

Endemic product sponsors are a critical part of the equation, too. Having a company overnight rods, reels or baits just before a tournament starts is a big help in making top finishes on the FLW Tour these days.

And let's not forget the service crews that keep the pros up and running during events.

Then there should be a tip of the hat given to the unseen community support pros receive. Whether it's some fishing

information before cut-off or a few home-cooked meals or a place to stay during the tournament to save big bucks on hotels, local anglers often extend a generous helping hand when pros are in town.

Finally, there is another major modern element in pro fishing that has forced the sport into the world of "we." That is the combo of live coverage and social media. Whether it's real-time photo galleries, *FLW Live* or even David Dudley giving you a look at his tournament day on Facebook Live, now the audience gets to vicariously "drop the hammer" with the pros.

As the old saying goes, "there is no 'I' in team," and in the world of professional bass fishing it's understandable why the word "we" has become such a popular pronoun when pros take center stage. ■

PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



Wesley Strader benefits from a supportive fishing "team" that includes his wife, Stephanie, who helps manage social media and sponsor relations.



Bobby Bare Still Picks, Sings and Fishes

.....

"I really like your magazine. It's my favorite. I read every one of 'em two or three times until the next one comes out," he said.

Praise from Caesar is praise indeed; the Caesar in this case being country music great Bobby Bare, a fan of *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine. We were sitting at the same table a couple of years ago on the occasion of Nina Wood's induction into the "Legends of the Outdoors" National Hall of Fame in Nashville. Bare joined our party at the request of Forrest Wood, an old friend of Bare's.

Since then I hadn't seen or talked to him until it was announced in the spring that he was issuing a new album, "Things Change," no small feat for this 82-year-old crooner who hit it big back in the era of steel guitars and rhinestone-covered Nudie Cohn outfits.

We country music fans who grew up in the '60s and '70s probably remember Bare for such singles as "500 Miles Away From Home," "Miller's Cave," "(Margie's at) The Lincoln Park Inn," "Marie Laveau" and "The Streets of Baltimore." He won a GRAMMY Award for the Best Country

and Western Recording of 1963 with "Detroit City," his song about a homesick farm boy who went to work in a car plant. A timeless favorite that might be regarded as his anthem, it's included in "Things Change." The album is the 39th of Bare's career, which is among the longest and most productive in an industry known for one-hit wonders and artists who are here today and gone tomorrow.

Before outlawry became a marketing ploy, Bare was ranked among the original "outlaws" of country music, perhaps more for his independence and the crowd he sometimes hung out with rather than his own predilection for honky-tonks and self-destructive behavior. He's been married to his wife, Jeannie, for more than 50 years and helped raise a passel of kids and grandkids to successful adulthood. He's also admired for looking after friends he made in the music business long after their stars dimmed and their fortunes waned.

Casual conversations with Bare have a way of morphing into bass fishing talk.

Turns out he has more than a passing acquaintance with FLW and its extended family. Back in the '80s, Bare became a spokesman of sorts for the Red Man Tournament Trail, the precursor to FLW, and it was during that time that he met many of the past and current stars of the circuit.

"Red Man paid me a whole lot of money to go to sales meetings and tournaments and host interviews with the winners," recalls Bare. "I went to a bunch of All-Americans and always enjoyed myself. Most fishermen are really good sports and the kind of down-to-earth crowd I like to be around."

Something about their upbringing and exposure to the natural world makes hunters and fishermen of a lot of country musicians. Bare "got ate up with fishing for whatever would bite" when he was a youngster growing up in rural Ohio. He's lived in various places, but was hooked on bass fishing back in the '50s when he lived in California, recorded a few songs and appeared in a couple of movies. Success came quickly after "Detroit City" was released, and he moved to the Nashville area in the mid-1960s to take advantage of his newfound celebrity.

Bare eventually became acquainted with other performers who shared his interest in bass fishing, among them Mel Tillis, Jerry Reed, Little Jimmy Dickens, Porter Wagoner, Waylon Jennings, John Anderson and Tom T. Hall. Bare has lived on Old Hickory Lake at Hendersonville, Tenn., for several decades.

"Jerry [Reed, who died in 2008] was probably my best fishing buddy – him and Little Jimmy Dickens," says Bare. "Every year Dickens and I would meet Jerry at Lake Okeechobee in Super Bowl week, cook some taters and beans, watch the game, and go fishing for the rest of the week. We had some real good times."

Bare has never recorded a song about fishing for mass release, though "The Great American Fisherman," the theme song for Roland Martin's television show, comes close. Bare wrote it when Orlando Wilson had his own show and was producing Martin's. Originally, Martin's song was titled "I Want to Go Fishing with Roland," and Wilson's was "The Great American Fisherman."

"It turned out that Orlando liked Roland's theme song the best, so he got me to switch them around," recalls Bare. "It was an awkward thing to do because of Orlando's name having three syllables in it. I think Roland wound up getting the best of that deal."

Martin's intro music contains references to famous bass lakes around the country, but Bare usually confines his fishing to south Florida waters or lakes closer to home. In January and February, he spends about 45 days fishing. Dale Hollow is a favorite, and Bare will spend a couple of weeks there targeting the lake's giant smallmouths. Kentucky Lake is another popular destination.

"When I'm home in the summer, I might fish a Tuesday nighter at the dam [on Old Hickory] with maybe 25 or 30 other boats, but it's so doggone hot we only fish from about 5:30 to 8:30," adds Bare, a member of the Grand Ole Opry and the Country Music Hall of Fame. "I would say Old Hickory is my least favorite lake. It's pretty tough."

Bare has outlived many of his fishing buddies, including Dickens and Reed, but his interest in fishing has never waned. Though he demurs from naming them, he has his favorite pros whose career paths he follows and techniques he employs. Nowadays, he's more interested in finesse-fishing tactics and how to apply them successfully. In that respect, he's like every other aspiring angler.

Bare fishes out of a Ranger Comanche, circa 1999, that's outfitted with a 225-hp engine. He had the boat's front deck lowered to make it safer for him to move around.

"I'm getting old, and my balance isn't what it used to be. And my family doesn't allow me to go fishing by myself anyway," he notes. "But I love that Ranger. It's loaded down with Power-Poles, electronics, remote-control trolling motor. Shoot, it's got everything I need."

Bare's latest album cover attests to the fact that his has become a household name like Cash or Jones. It features a stark black cover with the name "BARE" and the title, "Things Change," under it.

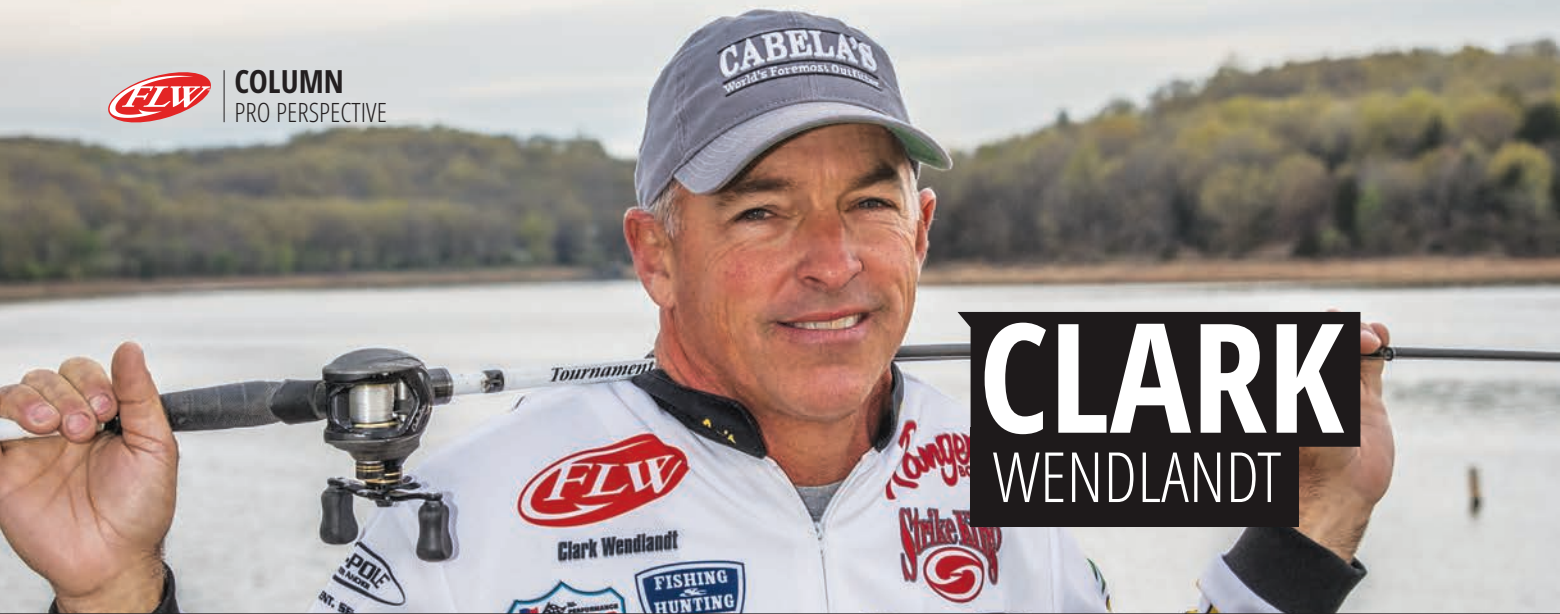
Most things do change in a lifetime, but, even at 82, there is much about Bare that hasn't. Two of the most important motivations that have helped define his life remain the same:

A singer has to sing, a fisherman has to fish. ■

PHOTO BY RILEY BARNES



Bobby Bare and two of his favorite trophies; at top, with his Grammy for his hit song, "Detroit City," and, at bottom, with a Lake Okeechobee toad caught during a recent trip.



CLARK WENDLANDT

Young Anglers: Learn to Find Bass, Not Waypoints



High school and college fishing are, without a doubt, the current rage in the bass tournament world.

Fishing organizations are tooting their high school and collegiate fishing horns pretty loudly these days. In addition, marine manufacturers, major tackle brands and sporting goods retailers are pouring sponsor and advertising dollars into these school-based programs. As a result, thousands of young anglers are getting exposed to the thrill of tournament competition at an earlier age than ever before.

As the popularity of student fishing increases, so does the number of inquiries that professional bass anglers get from young anglers about fishing locations. Since my home state of Texas has been a hotbed for high school and college fishing tournaments, I get these requests frequently. And I'm not alone. Many pros have received dozens of requests for fishing locations on lakes where they've done well in the past. What's most astounding is the number of parents who contact pros on behalf of their kids to basically solicit waypoints.

As a parent of two daughters who were big into volleyball, I get it. We parents want to do the most we can to help our kids succeed in their chosen sporting pursuits throughout high school and college. It's a natural tendency.

As a professional bass angler, however, I can also be candid in saying that gathering waypoints from other people for fishing tournaments is a serious hindrance to a young angler's growth in the sport, especially if he or she has any desire to turn pro.

The enormous growth in fishing because of these student programs is great, but competitive fishing is far different from other sports pursued in high school and college.

If they're involved in sports such as soccer, baseball or football, kids can attend specially tailored clinics and camps to hone skills. Some parents and athletes even seek out the services of private coaches for more intensive workouts. Understandably, parents looking for the same kind of help in the realm of bass fishing turn to high-level pros for guidance. But instead of asking for advice about fishing skills, most of the time their requests boil down to, "Hey, where are some good spots to fish on Lake Such-and-Such?"

Here is the cold, hard truth about the reality of competitive fishing: There is an art to finding fish that must be practiced, refined and mastered for long-term success. It's not that I mind young anglers approaching me. I really love their enthusiasm, but I want them to learn the coolest sport in the world in the only way that can truly benefit them – by spending time on the water. Fish-finding skills can only be acquired through time on the water. Period.

Sure, there have been some major tournaments won with a list of waypoints. It does happen, but it's largely an anomaly. Ask any full-time professional angler about the longevity of a career based on receiving fishing locations from other anglers, and they'll all tell you the same thing: There is no future in it. Which is why pros sometimes take offense to such waypoint solicitations. With the request for waypoints comes the insinuation that the whole sport is nothing but a GPS numbers game with very little credit given to the craft of actually finding fish.

The bottom line is that finding fish is a craft that must be honed. I don't give waypoints away, and as a rule I don't even keep them myself because it undermines the natural flow of practice when trying to find fish for a tournament. Most folks think I'm nuts when I tell them this, but it's true. I almost always start from scratch and let the fish tell me what they're doing.

I'm not trying to play the role of the information police in bass fishing here. Doing research on the internet for historically productive areas, patterns, lures, water levels, water temperatures, etc., is all part of the game now. What has become a bit alarming to me (and my peers) is the number of young anglers who think getting specific fishing locations is the end game. I can assure you that mindset is bad and is no way to build success in tournament fishing.

For that reason, I urge all young anglers and their parents to resist the temptation to solicit waypoints and exact fishing locations for tournament competition. It's a shortcut that becomes a crutch. Learning how to find fish through their own reconnaissance – not running a list of waypoints – is what made the Kevin VanDams, Andy Morgans, Brent Ehrlers and Greg Hackneys of the world the fishing stars they are today. ■

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TAKEOFF



WHAT'S INSIDE:

This simple tip will set you up for more slop-frogging success

Alex Davis says to "go small" with swimbait for bigger stringers this fall

Just how fast are bass?
Our experts weigh in

MR. SEPTEMBER BRENT ANDERSON FINALLY REVEALS THE FALL TOP-WATER SECRETS THAT HAVE EARNED HIM FIVE MULTI-DAY BFL WINS

The next big star might be college wonder kid Cole Floyd

What you need to know to choose the right outboard propeller

PHOTO BY MATT PACE



TAKEOFF
IN SEASON

OCTOBER

Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

TACKLE HACK: ALEX DAVIS ADDS WEIGHT TO FROGS IN FALL



Hack: Insert tungsten Carolina rig “beads” into a hollow frog before heading out to the mats. If necessary, cut a slit in the body to insert the weights. Then glue the slit closed.

Explanation: “The added weight provides several benefits,” says Davis. “When the weights hit each other they create noise, which helps fish to track and home in on the frog better. It also causes the frog to sit lower in the water, which creates more disturbance in the really thick mats and prevents bass from blowing the frog completely out of the water. Lastly, the added weight helps you cast the frog even farther.”

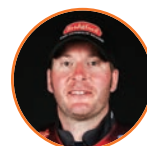
PRO CHOICE: FAVORITE FALL TOPWATER



1. Bryan Schmitt

SPRO Bronzeye Pop 60 in midnight walker

“I can cover water quickly, it’s weedless and it gets big bites in the fall. I can throw it up in laydowns, too, without hanging up.”



2. Matthew Stefan

1/2-ounce white Dirty Jigs Scott Canterbury Pro Buzz buzzbait

“I like to tip it with a boot-tail trailer, specifically a Keitech Swing Impact FAT 4.3. In the fall, they are usually chasing baitfish, and a buzzbait does a good job of bringing them up.”



3. Chris McCall

3/8-ounce Santone Lures buzzbait with 3/0 Gamakatsu trailer hook

“On overcast days I like to throw a plain black color with gold blade. If it’s sunny out, I prefer a white one with a hand-tied white, clear and blue skirt.” ■

THIS MONTH: U.S. ANGLERS TAKE ON THE WORLD

Led by Scott Martin, the USA Bass team is heading to South Africa to compete in the 2017 Bass World Championship on the Vaal River in South Africa Oct. 2-8. Members of the team include Martin (team captain), David Dudley, Mark Rose, David Fritts, James Watson, Scott Canterbury, Fred Roumbanis and Lionel Botha. They’ll compete against 15 other national teams from countries such as Russia, Spain, Italy and Mexico. Learn more at usangling.org or usabass.org.

OCTOBER

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THE POPCORN CRAWFISH PATTERN

Tour veteran Wesley Strader notes that impoundments such as Norris, Cherokee and Douglas in east Tennessee offer anglers a unique opportunity to capitalize on active bass during seasonal drawdowns.

“Even though bass normally feed on shad, I’ve discovered they will switch to crawfish during rapid drawdowns,” he says. “When levels drop 6 inches or more overnight, crawfish are left high and dry. Bass will key in on those areas and wait to ambush the crawfish as they hop back into the water.”

Productive areas include banks with river rock or larger chunk rock, areas adjacent to deeper flats, creek channels and river bends.

“I use two baits in that situation: a buzzbait tipped with a Zoom Horny Toad and a modified jig. I’ll strip the skirt off the jig and thread on a Zoom Z-Hog Jr. as a substitute.

“It’s a really fun pattern to run in the fall. It’s kind of like they are sitting next to a popcorn machine, waiting for the kernels to pop.”



PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL



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SMALL SWIMBAITS FOR AUTUMN SCHOOLERS

ALEX DAVIS' ADVICE ON WHEN TO SHUN THE BIG STUFF AND MATCH A SMALLER HATCH

By Curtis Niedermier

Big bass chase big baitfish and you catch them with big baits in the fall ... right?

In many cases, that classic strategy holds up, but the *big-big* approach in the transition period of fall doesn't always guarantee a limit, and there are other tactics tournament anglers should consider during their end-of-season events.

For instance, in T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League Super Tournaments on Lake Guntersville and Smith Lake in Alabama, FLW Tour pro and guide Alex Davis might spend some time chucking big stuff for kicker bass, but first he targets 12- to 13-pound limits that can get him through the cut. His basic approach is to fish a 2.8- or 3.8-inch Jackall Rhythm Wave swimbait or a small Keitech rigged on a light ball-head jig to go after schooling bass foraging for 2- to 2 1/2-inch young-of-the-year shad.

Small Size, More Bites

Big gizzard and threadfin shad are attractive meals to kicker largemouths, but many quality keepers take advantage of clouds of smaller shad that hatched earlier in the season. Davis figured that out a couple seasons ago when he downsized from Zoom Flukes to Fluke Jrs. on his double-Fluke rig.

"I went from catching one every 10 throws to doubling on every cast, one on each hook," he says. "They were schooling on grass edges. That's what clued me in to the whole downsize, match-the-hatch deal."

The Switch to Swimbaits

The double-Fluke success prompted Davis to experiment with small swimbaits such as the Rhythm Wave, which became his go-to once FLW outlawed the double-Fluke rig in Tour competition. It's perfect for targeting schoolers because it casts far and stays up near the surface.

"I put it on a 1/8- or 3/16-ounce ball-head jig with a 2/0 hook," adds Davis, whose favorite Rhythm Wave colors are prism shad and sexy albino.

Last season, during practice for the September BFL on Guntersville, Davis put the rig to work. Other anglers were chucking big, more traditional ledge-fishing baits with little success. One evening, he figured out those fish would eat the small swimbait, even though they wouldn't touch anything else.

"I'd catch one every cast," he says. "They [other anglers] were throwing typical ledge stuff. Nobody was downsizing."



Big bass eat big baits, but sometimes the better approach is to downsize and match a smaller baitfish size.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

Target Areas

At Smith, Davis usually pursues schooling bass over main-lake points. His approach is split between casting at bass he can see breaking on the surface and casting over areas where he's marked "streaking" bass – fish rising to the surface to eat – on his electronics.

The scenario at Guntersville is different.

"There'll be a grass mat, and then off the mat there's probably a 20-yard section of scattered clumps," Davis says. "Usually they'll school on a point or pocket in the grass where the grass is scattered. They'll stay on a point of grass all day long, so at Guntersville I always have the swimbait rigged and ready because if I see them busting I want to be able to go after them."

Technique

Catching schoolers starts with a long cast, and Davis begins reeling as soon as the bait splashes down.

"Don't just throw it out and reel it in. Make it do something different," he adds. "Make it act like an injured minnow. Pump it, kill it or twitch it. I do it pretty frequently to make sure it doesn't just track true the whole time."

Tackle

Light spinning rods and light line enhance the casting distance with a small swimbait. Davis' setup is 7-pound-test Sunline Shooter Finesse Special fluorocarbon spooled on a Shimano Stradic CI4+ 2500-size spinning reel and a 7-foot, medium-light Shimano Zodias rod.

He spools straight fluorocarbon to avoid having a line-to-leader knot that might slow the cast down when the knot ticks through the guides.



SMALL SPOONS WORK, TOO

Davis' preferred bait for targeting schoolers is the swimbait, but he'll also work on them with a 1/8-ounce silver Acme Kastmaster Spoon. He throws the spoon on the same rod he uses for the swimbait but downsizes to 4-pound-test line.

The retrieve is similar to the swimbait retrieve, with a little changeup.

"You've got to watch really trying to twitch it because if you twitch it it'll kind of hang up on itself," Davis says. "The best way I've seen is to throw it with a steady retrieve and once in awhile kill it." ■



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

BASS PERFORMANCE

HOW SPEED AND MANEUVERABILITY FACTOR INTO BASS FORAGING CAPABILITIES

By TJ Maglio



PHOTO BY ENGELSTON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

For years, there's been a saying among top anglers that "you can't outrun a bass." It means don't be afraid to fish quickly, as the fish will be able to catch up with the lure no matter how fast you reel it in.

Which got us wondering whether or not the saying is true, and how other performance characteristics of bass stack up. As it turns out, scientific research can break it down.

White Muscle vs. Red

Before diving into speed, it's important to know why some fish can outperform others in terms of power, swiftness and endurance. It's about muscle.

Fish muscle is actually composed of two different types of tissue. White muscle makes up the bulk of the muscle tissue in bass and other freshwater species. It is predominantly used for short-term bursts of speed, has low blood flow (which is why it's white) and can only provide energy for short durations of perhaps 10 to 30 seconds. This is why bass and other freshwater species tire so quickly when caught.

Fish also have red muscle, which has high blood flow and is the dominant type in many saltwater species such as tuna and salmon. Red muscle

is built for endurance, allowing fish to swim for hours or even days at a time – sometimes at high speeds. Saltwater anglers targeting billfish or tuna routinely fight hooked fish for hours, and it's because of those fishes' abundance of red muscle.

How Fast is a Bass?

There's been a large amount of research on fish speed and maneuverability characteristics. According to most research, bass are considered middle-of-the-road performers. They're not slow, but they're not exactly speed demons, even among other freshwater species.

Reports from a recent study showed that 5-centimeter (about 2 inches) largemouth bass were found to be able to reach burst speeds of close to one

meter per second (2.2 mph) for a few seconds. This is roughly equivalent with several other freshwater fish, including northern pike and bluegills, but slower than other species such as rainbow trout. Small fish are used in these studies because they're easier to work with in a laboratory setting, but empirical evidence shows pretty universally that adults perform better than juveniles, so top speeds can be even higher.

By my estimates, the fastest speed a bait can be retrieved with a modern high-speed baitcaster approaches the top speed of most bass. However, based on the latest research it's still accurate to say that in most circumstances you can't out-reel a bass.

Cornering Ability

Speed's not everything in the natural world. Maneuverability also plays a huge role in how effective a fish is at eating or avoiding being eaten. So where do bass stack up?

In the same study as mentioned previously, maneuverability was measured as relative turning radius (turning radius compared to body length). Again, bass (this time smallmouth bass) were found to be generalists. They can turn quickly, more so than trout, salmon, tuna or mackerel, but slower than bluegills, northern pike or angelfish.

How Does Prey Compare?

In the same study, several common bass prey species were also assessed for performance. Interestingly, speed differences were not very distinct between the species. Bass were able to burst to around one meter per second, and the literature shows that species such as bluegills, yellow perch, fathead minnows and common shiners are all very similar in their measured speed performance.

What this means for bass is that speed isn't necessarily their primary hunting tool. Instead, bass rely on guile, surprise and their ability to adapt well to almost any freshwater condition. ■



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BRENT ANDERSON'S AUTUMN APPROACH ON THE TENNESSEE

TOPWATER TACTICS FOR BASS GOBBLING GIZZARD SHAD

By Curtis Niedermier

The first time Brent Anderson put together Kentucky Lake's gizzard shad-topwater bass puzzle happened by chance. It was early autumn 2011, and the school of grass bass he had been pounding on all summer had recently vanished after the greenery finally died.

Convinced the mega-school had to be around the area somewhere, Anderson ventured from his waypoint

and started working along a shallow main-lake bar.

"This huge gizzard shad comes up out of the water on top of the bar," he recalls. "I rolled up there, and it turned out there was this big school of bass up there, and they were eating topwater."

Anderson remembered that day the next season, when he was hunting for fish prior to a fall tournament on Kentucky Lake.

"I went to that waypoint, and I ended up catching 28 pounds," he says.

A week later, with a topwater bait in hand and a handful of similar "shallow bar" spots marked with waypoints, Anderson earned the first in a long string of autumn tournament victories on Kentucky Lake that garnered him the nickname "Mr. September" throughout the Tennessee River Valley. The list includes four wins in multi-day T-H Marine FLW

Bass Fishing League Regional and Super Tournament events held in September or October, plus a pair of Weekend Series wins in the fall – all with topwater baits on Kentucky Lake. And he owes every one of his victories to the lessons he's learned about targeting gizzard shad-eating bass.

Location

Summertime is ledge-fishing season on many Tennessee River lakes, particularly Kentucky Lake, when bass school up on main-lake river ledges and bars. Once those schools start to disperse in the fall, many anglers head toward creeks and the backs of shallow bays where keeper bass are often seen busting young-of-the-year shad at the surface. Those bass, while fun to catch, usually don't win major tournaments, which is why Anderson takes a different approach beginning in early September.

His first step is to determine what section of the lake was most productive throughout summer. The biggest bass don't move far, he reasons, and so he keys on the same stretches of main-lake waters that produced big bags in summer.

"I look for any bar or flat offshore that's 3 or 4 feet deep that's got some stumps scattered around and deep water nearby," he says. "It [deep water] can be 8 feet deep, or it can be 25 feet deep. You want to be sitting in water a little deeper throwing into the shallowest water. I stay on the main lake all the time."

Some bass will stay on the same bars they occupied in late summer, but because autumn is reservoir draw-down season on Kentucky Lake, the fish have less water overhead in the fall and become more willing to rise for a topwater lure. But usually they're within close proximity.

Also, it's not as critical to cling to the edge of a drop-off in the fall as it is in summer. The better action often takes place up on top of broad mid-lake flats, provided gizzard shad are present.

Big Mouthfuls

Gizzard shad are the key element in Anderson's strategy. He locates them visually as he trolls along – the areas being generally too shallow for searching overhead with electronics. Where there are mature gizzard shad, there are usually mature bass.

The other way to locate key spots is through constant casting and covering water. According to Anderson, the 4- to 5-pounders that he's targeting don't often show themselves on the surface with obvious schooling activity such as anglers see from schools of smaller fish. Yet, they'll hammer a big, lumbering topwater bait that walks overhead.

Key areas can change from day to day as gizzard shad come and go.

"I've had a lot of these places where I'll be catching big ones and seeing gizzard shad, then all of a sudden the smaller shad move in and I don't catch the big ones anymore," Anderson says.

Two Kinds of Targets

Anderson divides fishing spots into two categories. The first is what he calls a "onesie, twosie hole," which is a spot that usually doesn't hold a big school of fish, but might hold quality bass. He fishes them quickly and moves on.

"Basically, you'll pull up and fish a 15-yard stretch, and you may or may not get a bite, but if you do it'll probably be a big one," he says. "These are places I fish really fast, and I may hit them several times during the day."

Onesie, twosie holes are spots that Anderson keeps to himself because they tend to produce year after year. Strangely, there's rarely an apparent reason why the spots remain so good. Anderson has done some winter-pool recon when the water is very low, expecting to find a depression, large stump or some other type of "spot on the spot," but there's seldom an obvious piece of cover or structure. His best advice for finding the big-fish holes is to put the trolling motor down and cover water – and save every waypoint, even if the spot only produces one or two bites.

The other type of autumn spot is the "mother lode hole." It's the kind of place that can produce a solid tournament stringer, possibly over multiple days of fishing.

"Those are the ones that I'm willing to sit on and kind of wait on them," Anderson says. "Normally, you don't have to wait on them, though. Normally, when you get there it's happening."

Big schools usually span larger areas where there's plenty of gizzard shad to go around, yet the fish aren't predictable from year to year. In fact, according to Anderson, most of the spots that produced his big, tournament-winning schools never came close to providing the same sort of results in subsequent visits.

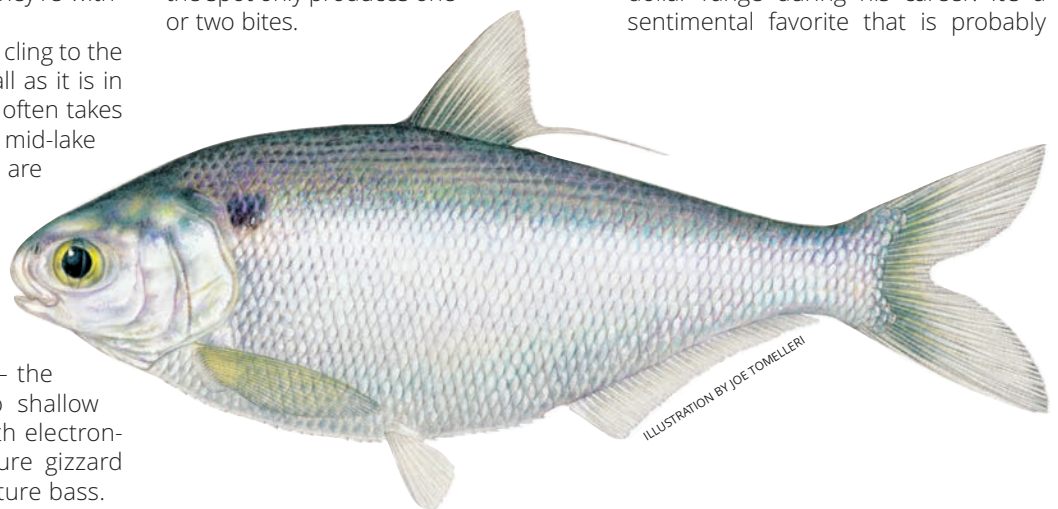
Autumn Weather

Weather patterns are as unpredictable as the bass in autumn, but Anderson believes that once the "topwater season" kicks off on the main lake in September, the weather won't keep the fish from biting until the pattern changes a couple months later.

"I have yet to find conditions they won't bite in, but they're almost impossible to find if it's windy," he says. "You need a little ripple for ideal conditions, and it's good to have sun so you can see and look for the gizzard shad swimming around when you're working your way down those bars. But once you locate those suckers and you locate the 'danger zone,' it's on. I've caught them in 4-foot waves and even in muddy water."

Tactical Topwater

There's a particular Heddon Super Spook in Anderson's boat that he's used to pocket well into the six-figure dollar range during his career. It's a sentimental favorite that is probably





3. Cotton Cordell Pencil Popper

1. Heddon Super Spook

2. Heddon Chug'n Spook

due to be displayed in a shadow box at his house one of these days, but Anderson still throws it as part of a three-bait topwater system that accommodates any weather condition.

1. Heddon Super Spook – Because the Spook floats “flat” on the surface, Anderson prefers to fish it on calm days. Otherwise it gets lost in the surface chop. His go-to lure has been painted several times, but the current rendition is a white shad pattern.

2. Heddon Chug'n Spook – The Chug'n Spook floats a bit more tail down, which helps it stay on top in a light chop. Anderson keeps it in hand until the waves build to about a foot.

3. Cotton Cordell Pencil Popper – In blown-out conditions when the wind is howling, Anderson reaches for a bait that's more popular for saltwater fishing: the Pencil Popper. It has a bigger profile and more action to help bass locate it in the waves.

The Approaches

Regardless of the bait, Anderson targets every bar or flat with one of two

approaches. The first is utilized when he's in search mode and trying to dial in the location of a school. Positioned off the deep edge and trolling steadily along, he bombs a cast as far as he can at about a 45-degree angle from his direction of travel and walks the bait back as fast as possible while maintaining a side-to-side cadence.

Once he's homed in on the school's location, Anderson adjusts the casting angle and throws nearly perpendicular to the drop-off, being sure to thoroughly cover the area. The goal is to reach fish that might be chasing gizzard shad way up on top of the structure.

Tackle

Anderson recently designed what he considers his perfect topwater rod for a company called Redemption Rods. He likes a 7-foot, medium-heavy blank with enough bend that, when paired with 65-pound-test braid, it's got some give if a fish bites close to the boat. The final piece of tackle is a 7.5:1 Team Lew's LITE Speed Spool LFS Series baitcasting reel. ■



Back-up Options

As dedicated as Anderson is to targeting big fish with topwater lures in the fall, he always has a couple of subsurface lures handy to test out on a spot if he thinks there are more fish present that aren't biting on the surface.

One is a 3/4-ounce football jig with a Strike King Rage Craw trailer, and the other is an Ignite Baits Swimbait on a 3/4-ounce jighead.

“That's usually for a little deeper school,” he says. “And sometimes there'll still be some stump bars that have fish a little deeper. In all these tournaments that I've won, there are only a couple of them where I've been able to catch 10 or 15 fish [in a two-day or three-day tournament, respectively] all on top. I usually smash them a day or two and then have to go and do something else.” ■

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PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



FLOYD'S MOVE TO THE FOREFRONT

BETHEL UNIVERSITY'S COLE FLOYD IS PUTTING THE FLW FIELD ON NOTICE WITH SIX TOP-10 FINISHES IN 2017

By Joe Sills

To say that Cole Floyd is on fire in the tournament world would be an understatement. At the tender age of 20, the third-year Bethel University student is one of the hottest young guns in the FLW family, having bulldozed his way into September holding down the top spot in the Angler of the Year races of both the Costa FLW Series Central Division and the T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League LBL Division.

A strong finish at the Lake of the Ozarks Central Division event in October will likely wrap up the AOY crown for the Leesburg, Ohio, native,

who's tallied six combined top-10 finishes in the BFL, Costa FLW Series and YETI FLW College Fishing trails this year, plus a runner-up finish with partner Carter McNeil at the Bassmaster College Series Championship.

The Costa FLW Series Central Division tournament on Kentucky Lake in June might be considered Floyd's most stunning achievement to date. Competing against some of the Series' heaviest hitters, the Ohio angler finished runner-up to Tennessee River juggernaut Jason Lambert, whose 71-pound, 10-ounce sack was 7 ounces better than Floyd's.

Starting Points

Floyd's education in bass fishing began in an unlikely place, a corner of southern Ohio that could hardly be called a breeding ground of aspiring tournament stars.

An hour and a half east of Cincinnati, Paint Creek Lake and Rocky Fork Lake are perched on opposite sides of U.S. Highway 50. At less than 2,000 acres apiece, they're the kind of mid-sized, state-managed fisheries that aren't large enough or prolific enough to get on the maps of the major tournament trails. They're the kind of lakes that are home to countless dinks and occasional trophy

PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN



In June, Cole Floyd nearly took down Kentucky Lake ledge master Jason Lambert in a Costa FLW Series event, which put him on the map as a young gun to watch.

bass, and support a boatload of “fruit jar” tournaments. The fish are seldom cooperative, and an angler has to develop a solid set of skills to catch bass from them consistently – just the kind of challenging proving grounds for up-and-coming fishermen.

“They weren’t great lakes,” Floyd says of his original home waters. “The fishing was tough. Sometimes we’d go to Lake Erie or the Ohio River, but we mostly fished those two lakes.”

While those small lakes were perfect places to start a career, Floyd soon found himself learning the secrets of bass fishing on two of the most storied fisheries in the sport – Kentucky Lake and Lake Guntersville.

Years before the FLW spotlight began to shine on him, Cole Floyd shared the front deck of his father Steve’s Ranger with his two brothers, Dalton, 22, and Wyatt, 18. There, the Floyd boys would spend summer days flipping Kentucky Lake’s shallow bushes with their dad, an accomplished tournament fisherman who’s fished more than 120 FLW Tour, Costa FLW Series and BFL events since 1995 and scored top-10 finishes in more than a fourth of them. In June, Steve placed 23rd in the same Costa event where his middle son finished second.

Fishing Kentucky Lake, about 400 miles southwest from Paint Creek and Rocky Fork, was a vacation of sorts over the years for the Floyds. Whenever they could, the family would burn a path down the Western Kentucky Parkway to Paris, Tenn.

Eventually, dad’s lessons taught in the grass beds, brush piles and bank cover at Kentucky Lake would merge with others from another Floyd outpost on the Tennessee River farther southeast: Lake Guntersville.

“That’s where I learned to ledge fish,” Cole says of Guntersville. “For about 10 years, my brothers and I would go down there and stay with my grandma during spring break. I kind of taught myself how to ledge fish out there. It was ridiculous at first. I only used down-imaging. I had no idea what side-imaging was for, and I’d spend hours out there just idling around trying to learn how to read graphs.”

Guntersville wore a groove in Cole’s mind. In one stretch at age 15, he spent 40 days graphing, learning and fishing the big lake in the Alabama hills. Every trip south meant another opportunity to grow, and he seized as many chances as he could.



The Tennessee River has shaped Floyd’s skill set, from flipping bushes to fishing ledges.

The FLW Trail

Back home in Ohio, Cole skipped the high school fishing circuit, but kept fishing local derbies, using the lessons learned on his home lakes as well as Guntersville and Kentucky Lake to claim his fair share of victories. All the while, his family spent a lot of time cruising up and down the Western Kentucky Parkway.

“We kept going back to Kentucky Lake,” Cole says. “My parents bought a house in Paris [Tenn.], and when it came time to go to college, I knew I wanted to be by the lake.”

The lure of Bethel University’s high-profile fishing team drew him to nearby McKenzie, Tenn. Now, he’s juggling classes in business management with the school’s collegiate bass fishing program, the BFL trail and the Costa FLW Series.

Cole says the winnings – more than \$30,000 this year, so far – are all going

back into college expenses and tournament entry fees.

“The ultimate goal is to fish professionally for a living,” he says. “If I can’t get there, I want to use that business degree to land a job in the fishing industry.”

Of course, it’s a long, winding road from those nondescript Ohio lakes off of Highway 50, but if Cole’s star continues to rise, the same road that carried him to the Tennessee River lakes will soon bear the weight of his FLW Tour rig.

“He’s so much better than I ever was,” says Steve, who spent three years on the FLW Tour. “I’m tickled to death. I’m proud to see him doing so well at such a young age.

“I told him his day will come,” adds the proud father. “I told him if he gets that degree, he’ll always be able to get a job in the fishing industry, whether he’s on the Tour or somewhere else.” ■



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THE SPIN ON PROPS

ACHIEVE MAXIMUM OUTBOARD PERFORMANCE BY CHOOSING THE RIGHT PROP

By Joe Balog
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

A bass boat's prop is a critical component for achieving optimal performance. In the old days, the rule for choosing props was simple: Run a three-blade prop for speed and a four-blade prop in big water or on boats needing a helping hand to get on plane.

Today's bass boats are larger and much heavier than ever before, with add-ons such as shallow-water anchors, huge jack plates and up to four massive batteries to accommodate 36-volt trolling motor systems adding to the total. Correspondingly, props have changed, too, with manufacturers producing more and better products.

So how do we determine what prop is best for our boat? It's all about the science behind the spin.

Material

Though aluminum and even plastic are used to make props, the choice for bass boats is stainless steel. Achieving maximum performance in a large rig through aluminum is likely impossible, since the material flexes and is less efficient at propelling the boat forward at the proper rate for the chosen prop – the result being what engineers refer to as “slip.” For that reason, prop engineers have strived to use the hardest, strongest steel alloys for prop design, allowing the most aggressive shaping and best performance with the least amount of slip.

RPM and WOT

The first step in choosing the best prop is to determine your motor’s proper RPM range at wide-open throttle (WOT). Engine manufacturers make this information available online with simple prop-selector tools. Once the WOT RPM range is determined, the goal is to obtain maximum speed and performance in that range, which sometimes requires trial and error with different props.

Diameter and Pitch

To dial in the right prop for your boat’s WOT RPM range, you need to understand how high-performance props work. Bass boat propellers are categorized by two basic measures: diameter and pitch. The diameter is the measurement of the inside hub, and, for the most part, the smaller the diameter, the faster the prop will spin. Pitch is primarily controlled by blade size and shape, and is a measurement of the forward travel distance per revolution of the prop in a solid (no-slip) medium. For instance, a 27-pitch prop should travel 2 inches farther than a 25-pitch prop given the same power, load, drag, etc. Therefore, given the same RPM, a prop of larger pitch will push a boat faster. That same larger size requires more power to spin, though, so the proper balance of pitch and RPM must be obtained.

Blades

Another major prop variable to consider is the number of blades. For the most part, the more blades, the more bite, and therefore quicker response in the boat.

Props with four (or occasionally five) blades typically turn sharper and help the boat plane off faster, and can keep a boat on plane at lower speeds and in winding turns. However, with an added blade comes more drag in the water, and often an overall reduction in speed.

A three-blade prop has less drag and traditionally produces a higher top-end speed.

The three-blade-versus-four-blade decision is more complicated these days due to the size of bass boats and corresponding increase in water draft. Engineers call this “increased wetted area.”

With more wetted area, drag is substantially increased, requiring even more propeller engineering ingenuity. For these circumstances, outboard manufacturers are again turning to four-blade models to lift the boat better. By utilizing an additional prop blade, the boat is lifted higher, the waterline is pushed back and drag is reduced. If you’re operating at the correct RPM range at wide-open throttle, but can’t seem to get proper speed, water drag might be your problem, and a four-blade prop might help.

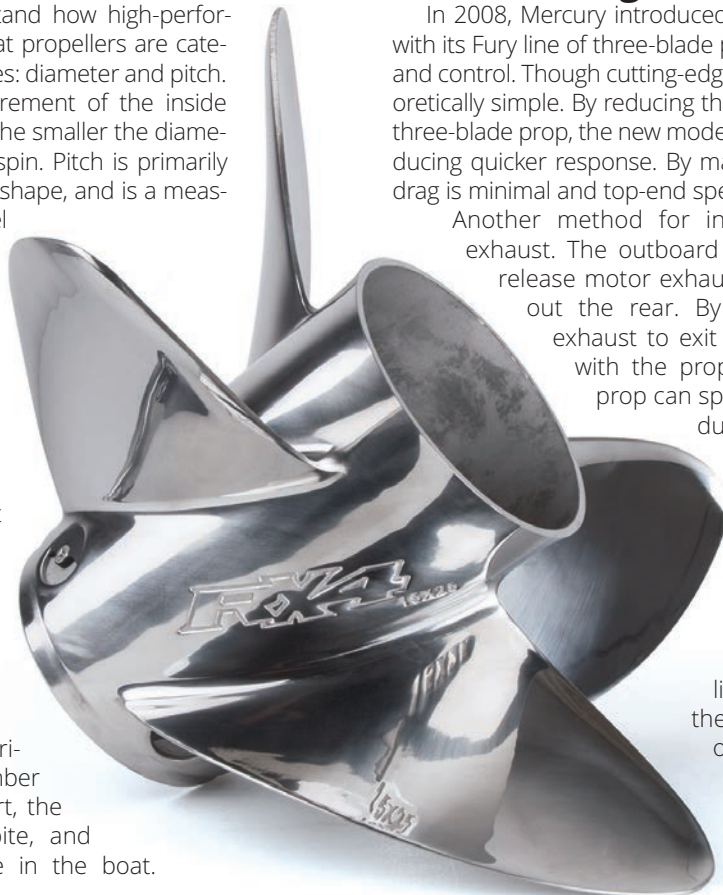


Advanced Engineering

In 2008, Mercury introduced the first modern hybrid prop with its Fury line of three-blade props designed for both speed and control. Though cutting-edge at the time, its concept is theoretically simple. By reducing the hub diameter of a traditional three-blade prop, the new model is able to “spin up” faster, producing quicker response. By maintaining three blades overall, drag is minimal and top-end speed isn’t sacrificed.

Another method for increasing spin is to control exhaust. The outboard motors used on bass boats release motor exhaust through the prop hub and out the rear. By allowing a portion of that exhaust to exit sooner, the water in contact with the prop becomes aerated, and the prop can spin more easily. This helps produce immediate lift, also known as “hole shot,” in the boat.

Most high-end stainless props offer some sort of exhaust ports. Evinrude has taken the concept one step further with its Variable Vent Ports (VVP) on the Raker H.O. prop line. Boat owners can tweak the exact amount of ventilation offered through the prop hub to match their personal boat and load dynamics best. Need more prop spin? Start opening ports. ■





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**FORREST WOOD CUP
COVERAGE**



ATKINS MAKES MAGIC ON MURRAY

27-year-old Tour rookie wins the Forrest Wood Cup

By Rob Newell

Justin Atkins believes he was destined to be a professional bass angler. The Forrest Wood Cup is a world championship bass tournament that changes lives. In the second week of August 2017, those two forces – a young man’s unwavering belief in his own destiny, and the Cup’s life-changing capacity to fulfill that destiny – collided on South Carolina’s Lake Murray. The result of that dramatic impact not only vindicated Atkins’ belief in himself and affirmed the awesome power of the Cup to change lives, it transformed a fledgling FLW Tour rookie into an instant professional bass fishing star.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

A Championship Script

What made Atkins' victory in the 2017 Cup so impressive was how effortless he made it look. From his dominant pattern and technique, to his class and polish with the media, to his cool-headed demeanor during the high-pressure event, it was as if Atkins, 27, had scripted the storyline for the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup long before it began.

Indeed, the Florence, Ala., angler had rehearsed this championship-winning experience in his head a thousand times. He didn't necessarily know it would happen at the Forrest Wood Cup. He had no idea it would take

place at Lake Murray. And he certainly had no clue that chucking a pencil popper over cane piles in 25 feet of water was going to earn him \$300,000. All he really knew, without a shadow of a doubt, is that someday tournament bass fishing would be his profession.

"It was just meant to be," Atkins says candidly about his win. "Becoming a professional bass angler is all I've wanted to do since I was a kid."

Atkins is well aware that professing that his destiny was to be a professional bass angler could be mistaken for arrogance, which is why he's kept it mostly to himself for the last 10 years while

quietly honing his fishing craft on the water.

However, once he toted the Forrest Wood Cup home from South Carolina, Atkins became a bit more vocal about what his intentions have been all along.

"This is what I was meant to do," he adds. "I don't know how else to explain it. Financially, I went out on a limb this year just to fish the Tour. I feel like God has a plan for me, and I have faith in His plan."

Following Atkins' ninth-place showing in his FLW Tour debut on Lake Guntersville this year, his name quickly surfaced on pro fishing's new-talent radar.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

From there it didn't take long for FLW's on-the-water reporting team to identify Atkins as one to watch in 2017. Given today's era of real-time reporting in professional tournament fishing, Atkins' natural knack with a rod and reel quickly became apparent. He led the FLW Tour Rookie of the Year race for much of the season and eventually finished runner-up with two top-10 tournament finishes.

By the end of the season, conversation among FLW pundits had turned from if Atkins would win a Tour event to when he would win a Tour event. And that "when" just happened to be on the sport's biggest stage in Columbia, S.C.





Commanding the Cup

On day one of the Cup, Atkins took command of the event with a stunning 21-pound, 5-ounce catch to grab the early lead over hometown favorite and former Cup winner Anthony Gagliardi.

Atkins' Cup tactic was fishing big, noisy pencil poppers over the top of submerged "cane piles." A cane pile is a type of man-made fish habitat comprised of bamboo stalks clumped together and cemented into a bucket, then placed upright in the lake. The idea is to get the cane piles to stand up vertically in the water column to simulate standing timber, giving bass an ambush point to lurk around while waiting on unsuspecting shad and blueback herring to cruise by near the surface.

The cane piles are often placed in 20 to 30 feet of water throughout the main lake on the breaks of humps and points, which are known travel routes for

nomadic herring. Bamboo that stands up 10 to 20 feet off the bottom and is about 5 to 10 feet shy of the surface is ideal.

Dialing in on Cane

Cane piles are prolific in Lake Murray. The problem, however, is that despite their numbers, cane piles are hard to find.

"The cane is thin and gets waterlogged, which makes it hard to detect on side-imaging sonar," Atkins explains. "They do show up with traditional 2-D sonar, but happening across one right under the boat is like finding a needle in a haystack."

Atkins would know. He spent two and a half days of pre-practice looking for cane piles before he found the first one.

"I discovered the first one with 2-D sonar and marked it," Atkins recalls. "Then I came back to it the next day and idled back and forth by it about a

dozen times while I dialed in my side-imaging until I could see it clearly."

Atkins says adjustments to sensitivity, contrast and chart speed were needed to juice up his signal and clearly define a cane pile on side-imaging. The chart speed was particularly important. When the return scrolled by at a faster speed on the screen, it enlarged the image of the cane pile and the cane's sonar "shadow" out to the side.

"Once I got the side-imaging dialed in where I could see cane piles out both sides of my boat at 100 feet, it was on," Atkins says. "I spent the next six days side-imaging for cane."

In all, he located nearly 80 piles, with about 25 of them winding up as key targets.

"The fresher, bushier piles were better, without a doubt," Atkins says. "I could see more fish returns around them when compared to the older, thinner ones."





PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



One Lure, One Rod, \$300,000

Atkins won the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Murray with a three-day total of 59 pounds, 4 ounces. He caught all 15 of the bass he weighed in with a single lure: an ima Little Stik 135 pencil popper in chrome.

Big pencil popper-style topwaters have emerged as top producers on herring lakes due to their extreme castability and loud, thrashing surface noise that “draws up” or “calls up” bass. Whether the pencil popper imitates a single herring really well or just creates so much commotion on the surface that bass believe they’re missing out on schooling activity is up for debate. Either way, one thing Atkins proved unequivocally is when that bite is on, it only takes one lure to score big.

Atkins tied the Little Stik directly to 30-pound-test Berkley Trilene braid, opting not to tie in any kind of monofilament or fluorocarbon shock leader. Instead, he fished the lure on a 7-foot, 5-inch composite rod that features a deep parabolic bend to allow the fish to eat the lure and turn down with it with less risk of pulling the lure away too soon. An Abu Garcia Revo reel with a high-speed 7.1:1 retrieve ratio was critical for reeling in long casts quickly to get the bait back out to schooling fish before they swam back down.

PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH

Championship Strategy

Once the piles were located, the idea was to “call up” bass from the piles to the surface to get them to compete for the bait. In order to do that, Atkins opted for an ima Little Stik 135, a 5 1/2-inch-long pencil popper that casts like a bullet and produces a raucous action on the surface thanks to a cupped nose and thumping rattle chamber.

Atkins made roughly 30 stops per day on his best cane piles. At every stop his objective was to line up the submerged pile, make a cast directly over it and walk the Little Stik directly overhead.

When everything went right, the “call up” was answered with a large boil and a choked Little Stik in the throat of a hefty Lake Murray bass.

Eventually he settled into a high-speed, run-and-gun program of pulling up to a cane pile, firing only a handful of casts and then moving on. His strategy allowed Atkins to put his bait in front of more fish than most other pros, while letting each spot rest and the bass to reset after a catch.

Things went exactly right for Atkins for a majority of the tournament, especially the final day, when he experienced magic on Lake Murray and called up a stringer of 4- to 5-pound bass.

As *FLW Live* coverage of the final day unfolded at Murray, it was clear Atkins could do no wrong, short of a few missed opportunities early. After that, his primary area came to life with big largemouths crushing herring on the surface. Time and again Atkins’ top-water disappeared into voracious boils. When the madness was over, Atkins had sacked up a tournament-best 22 pounds, 1 ounce to clinch victory.

At one point during his final-day magical melee, Atkins stopped momentarily to catch his breath and calm his trembling hands.

“This is unbelievable,” he gasped to the folks watching on *FLW Live*, while trying to keep his emotions in check. “I’m having the best fishing day of my entire life right now, and it’s on the final day of the Forrest Wood Cup ...”

Some things are just meant to be.



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



PHOTO BY JUDY WHITE



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



Different Rule for the School

Conventional theories in the world of bass fishing put bass tight to cover and into shade on sunny days. Meanwhile, dark, cloudy days tend to make them roam away from cover.

But if you're fishing schooling bass, especially on herring lakes, you might have to rethink those "rules."

According to Atkins, the bass schooling around cane piles at Murray played by different rules during the Cup. By his observations, they actually tucked tighter to the cane on cloudy days and turned into true roaming schoolers on the sunniest days.

"Without a doubt, my bites came straight over cane when it was dark and cloudy," Atkins says. "I mean I had to bring my lure right over the top of it to get them to come up. But if it was bright and sunny, it's like those same bass were out away from the piles, sort of free-roaming. I had a lot more unanswered casts right over cane on those sunny days. Yet, they would be blowing up 50 yards away from the cane."

Atkins' only guess is that the herring come up high in the water column on sunny days and go down in the water column on cloudy days, and the bass follow.

"If those herring are up high migrating on the surface on a sunny day, bass can lurk around down there 10 feet below them, and the herring have no clue they're being tracked," Atkins says. "But if the herring are down on a cloudy day, moving in that 5- to 10-foot-deep zone below the surface, bass need to tuck away and hide to ambush them."

"Obviously we don't know the true reasons those crazy bass do what they do," Atkins adds. "But that's my best guess as to why they seem so glued to cover on the darkest days."





PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDRUP





PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

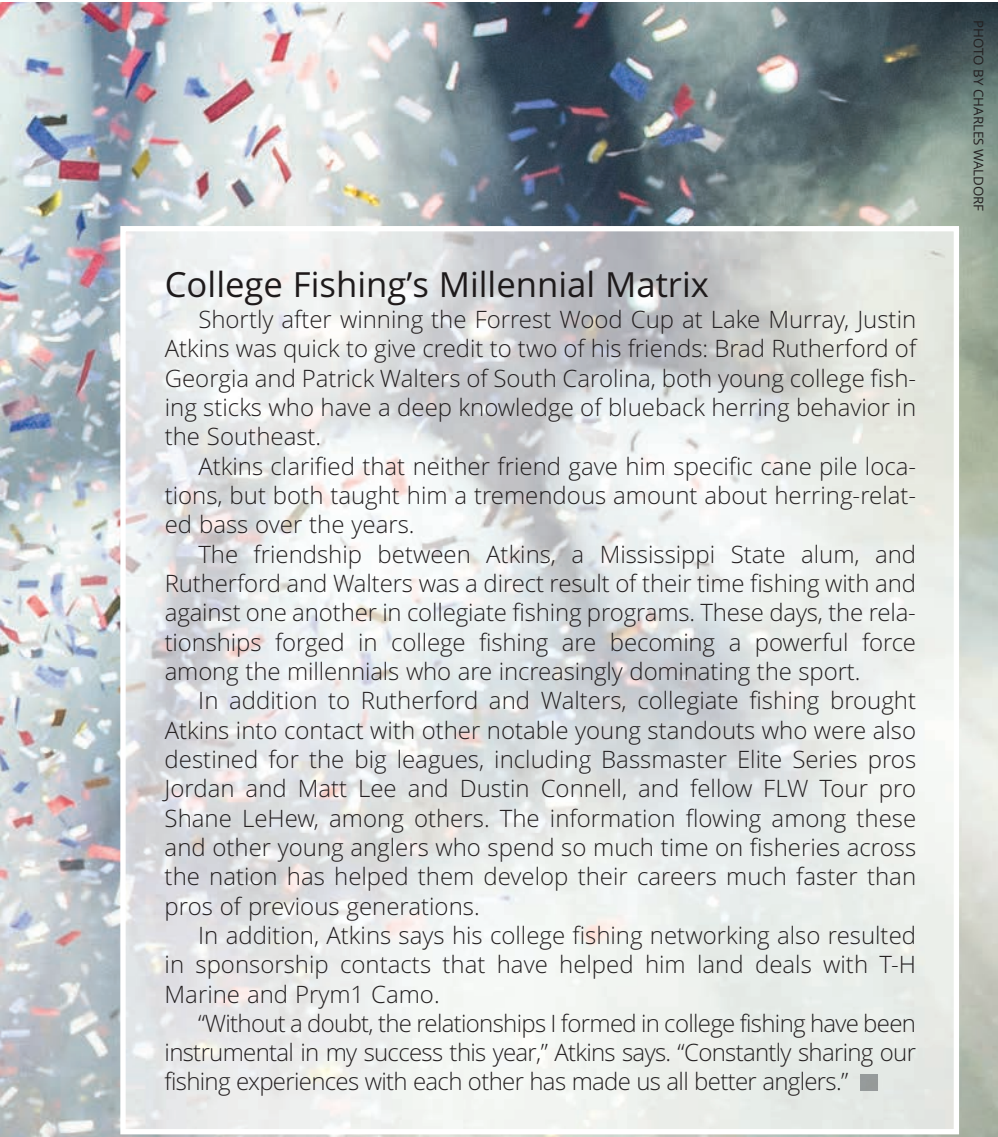


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

College Fishing's Millennial Matrix

Shortly after winning the Forrest Wood Cup at Lake Murray, Justin Atkins was quick to give credit to two of his friends: Brad Rutherford of Georgia and Patrick Walters of South Carolina, both young college fishing sticks who have a deep knowledge of blueback herring behavior in the Southeast.

Atkins clarified that neither friend gave him specific cane pile locations, but both taught him a tremendous amount about herring-related bass over the years.

The friendship between Atkins, a Mississippi State alum, and Rutherford and Walters was a direct result of their time fishing with and against one another in collegiate fishing programs. These days, the relationships forged in college fishing are becoming a powerful force among the millennials who are increasingly dominating the sport.

In addition to Rutherford and Walters, collegiate fishing brought Atkins into contact with other notable young standouts who were also destined for the big leagues, including Bassmaster Elite Series pros Jordan and Matt Lee and Dustin Connell, and fellow FLW Tour pro Shane LeHew, among others. The information flowing among these and other young anglers who spend so much time on fisheries across the nation has helped them develop their careers much faster than pros of previous generations.

In addition, Atkins says his college fishing networking also resulted in sponsorship contacts that have helped him land deals with T-H Marine and Prym1 Camo.

"Without a doubt, the relationships I formed in college fishing have been instrumental in my success this year," Atkins says. "Constantly sharing our fishing experiences with each other has made us all better anglers." ■

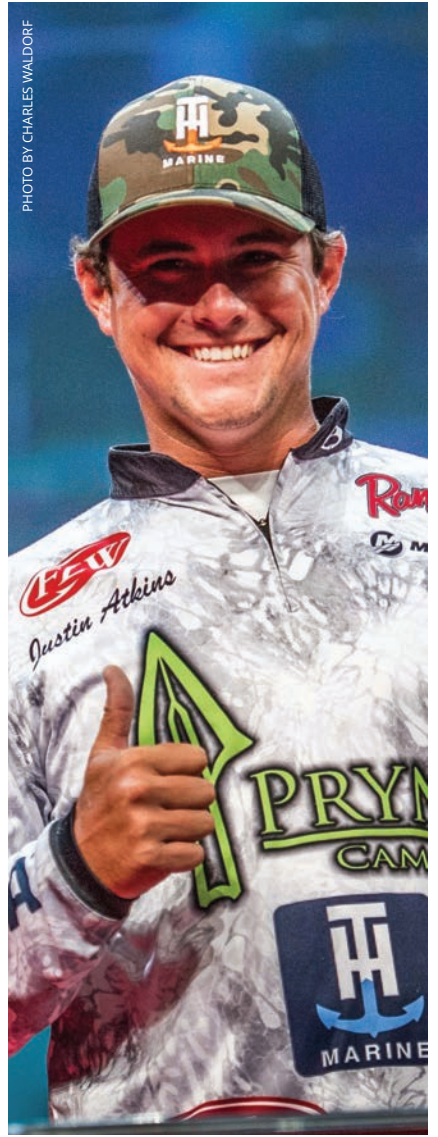


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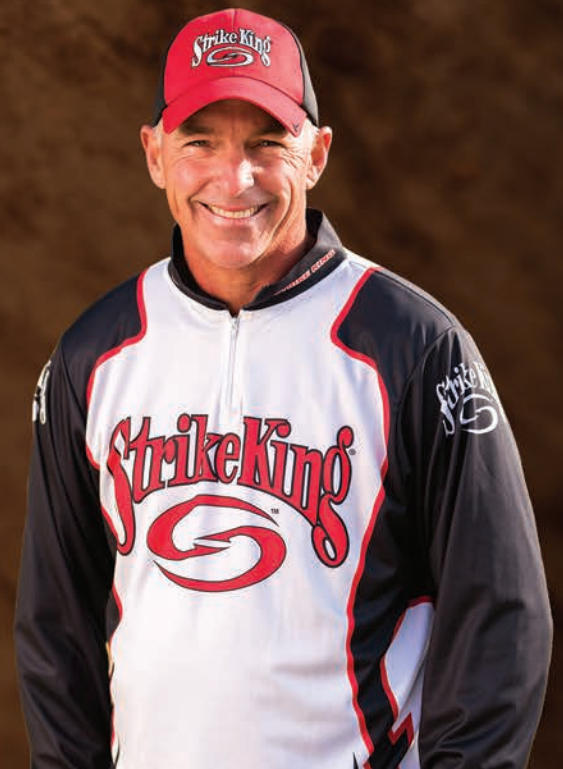


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THE TOP 20

PATTERNS OF THE 2017 CUP CONTENDERS



PHOTO BY MATT PACE



TRAVIS FOX | 56LBS, 11oz



By Curtis Niedermier
PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Travis Fox didn't know anything about fishing for herring-eating bass prior to the Forrest Wood Cup, but he understands them a little better now after coming just one kicker shy of winning at Murray.

In practice, Fox located a series of main-lake points on the lower end where bass were schooling on herring and banked his tournament on that area.

"I had three different spots where I caught multiple fish and I could catch them fast," says Fox, who planned to fish one spot per day once the tournament began. "One spot was dynamite, and they were all good ones. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I'll win off of here.' But

during the first hour of the first day of the tournament, I pulled up to fish the very best spot and never had a bite. Then I went to my day-two spot and never had a bite, and then my day-three spot and never caught anything."

Fox eventually improvised and ran to a back-up spot: a long, slow-tapering main-lake point that he figured as nothing more than mediocre, but where he quickly started filling the livewell. That spot wound up churning out three keepers per day, with the remainder of his catch coming "a fish here, a fish there" from similar main-lake spots.

Though there was a cane pile situated on the main point, Fox says he didn't



have to cast directly over it to get bit. Most of the fish he called up when there wasn't any schooling activity came off a "knuckle" – or drop-off – on the tip. The rest were scattered.

"They were all over," he says of the bass on the point. "They weren't right where that cane was. They'd come up schooling 50 yards from it, either to the left or the right."

Fox's main bait was an ima Little Stik in the American shad color, but on day three, when the topwater failed to produce early, he stuck a 6-pound kicker with a Strike King Sexy Spoon, and eventually finished his limit with a Storm Arashi Top Walker.

SPOON BITE NEARLY GIVES FOX THE EDGE

One of the most exciting moments captured on *FLW Live* occurred on the morning of day three, when Fox ripped a Strike King Sexy Spoon off the bottom of his best point and bowed up on a 6-pounder. The spoon got him back in the hunt, and were it not for a couple of lost fish, plus some true giants that swiped or missed his topwater bait, Fox might have completed the comeback in part with an unlikely heavy metal presentation.

"Whenever you're catching them on the spoon on Kentucky Lake, a lot of times they're breaking the water. Or they're feeding under the water and they're schooling," says Fox. "That's pretty much the same scenario as you have going on at Murray. They're chasing great big bait – big herring. Why not throw that great big spoon?"

"All the tackle shops over there, even the marina, they had like a 2- to 4-foot display of spoons. I thought they must catch them on that big ol' spoon over there. Otherwise, why would they sell them?"



BRANDON COBB | 54LBS, 10oz



By Chad Love
PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

Unlike many pros who fished the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup, Brandon Cobb knows all about the Lake Murray blueback herring game, but that doesn't mean he particularly likes it, or even planned to fish it. On the contrary, Cobb much prefers the shallow game, and that's exactly what he planned to do on Murray.

That is, until he ran into a red-hot topwater bite during pre-practice that made him re-evaluate everything.

When he came back for practice Cobb spent most of his time idling, pinpointing cane piles, brush and drop-offs,

trying to mark as many suspended fish as he could, and hoping he could come back and call them up when the tournament started.

"There ended up being a very small window when you could catch them," he says. "You had to be on your best school right when they were biting, and usually that was anywhere from 8:30 to 10:30."

All Cobb could do was pick what he thought were his best spots, put the hammer down and hope he picked correctly.

"I was fishing the lower end almost exclusively, from Bear Creek down to the dam," says Cobb. "But I was fishing both



sides of the lake, basically making giant laps around the entire lower end.

"On the first two days I never caught a fish that was schooling, per se, but on that last day the fish weren't sitting where I thought they were, and that messed me up some."

Cobb threw four primary baits. With a slight breeze or chop on the water he'd throw a Yo-Zuri Hydro Pencil. When the water got slick and calm, Cobb would change to a slightly smaller Yo-Zuri 3DB Series Pencil or a Yo-Zuri 3DR Series Pencil. On day three Cobb also threw a Zoom Super Fluke in glimmer blue.

KNOWLEDGE AND EFFICIENCY KEY TO COBB'S SUCCESS

"Two things I felt helped me catch fish: One, having prior knowledge of that off-shore herring bite. It's a completely different type of fishing than anywhere else in the country. Second, my Lowrance electronics," says Cobb. "You have to be efficient with your plan, and you have to know exactly where you are. If I'm fishing 50 to 60 places a day, and it takes me 30 or 40 seconds longer to find my spot when I pull up, that's 10 fewer places to fish by the end of the day. Using the accuracy of my GPS and graphs to line everything up quickly was crucial."

Aside from brief windows of schooling activity in the morning, Cobb spent the remainder of the tournament running his waypoints and making just a few casts on every stop. If a spot produced, it usually only gave up one bass, and the rest of the fish would be pulled off with it. By moving on quickly, Cobb gave each spot time to replenish, and he could come back later and hit it again.



BRYAN THRIFT | 51 LBS, 15oz

4

By Colin Moore
PHOTO BY CHRIS BURGAN

At the Forrest Wood Cup's opening banquet on the tournament's eve, Bryan Thrift spent only a couple of minutes reflecting on his Angler of the Year season. His comments were brief, but starting the next morning, he let his fishing do the talking. The North Carolina pro went on to place fourth in the event with 51 pounds, 15 ounces and notched his sixth consecutive top-10 finish in FLW's crowning event.

Though Thrift tends to shy away from the herring lakes of South Carolina and Georgia, he fished a solid tournament at Lake Murray that didn't rely solely on the problematic baitfish pattern. His two-pronged approach to each day's fishing

was based on a milk run in the mid-lake area that targeted topwater fish and others down deep. Thrift started each morning lobbing a Paycheck Baits The One pencil popper across the flats and points where scattered bass were chasing and feasting on bluebacks.

Once the topwater bite slowed down, Thrift switched to a 10-inch worm or a Damiki 6.5 Finesse Miki (watermelon candy) rigged on a 1/8-ounce shaky head and fished on a 6-foot, 10-inch Fitzgerald spinning rod with 10-pound-test P-Line braid and an 8-pound-test P-Line Tactical Fluorocarbon leader.

"It was about half of this and half of that as far as how I caught my fish in the



tournament,” says the 2017 AOY. “Where I was, the topwater bite would just go dead after a couple of hours, and that’s when I would fish deep. I don’t understand the herring bite all that well anyway. It was slow fishing, but that’s OK. I love the summer championship and love the tough, tough tournaments like Murray. It suits me. With only about 50 boats you can get a good milk run going, and it kind of plays into my style of fishing better.”

Thrift caught fish on the walking bait over water as shallow as 12 feet and as deep as 38 feet. His most productive brush piles and cane piles were 15 to 32 feet deep.

NO BIGGIE

The critical difference between Thrift’s three-day stringer and those of the anglers who finished ahead of him was kicker fish – or the lack thereof. Though the North Carolina pro’s 15 keepers weighed in during the event averaged just over 3 pounds each, his biggest fish was a 5-pounder caught the first day. In contrast, winner Justin Atkins’ bass averaged a tad under 4 pounds apiece.

“I’m not really sure why the bigger fish were so hard to come by,” says Thrift. “That’s just fishing, and all else being equal you never know for sure why somebody else catches the bigger fish and you don’t.”

Thrift conjectured that one possible explanation was because he didn’t spend all his fishing hours targeting the herring bite, as did all three of the pros who finished ahead of him in the standings.

“I guess some of my fish were a little skinnier, a little lighter, because of where they were [on brush piles and cane piles] and that they weren’t fattening up on the herring so much. It’s hard to say.”



ANTHONY GAGLIARDI | 51 LBS, 3oz



By Kyle Wood
PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Anthony Gagliardi, the hometown favorite, came into the Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Murray looking to notch not only another victory on his home lake, but also to become the first to win two Cup titles. He won his first Cup at Murray in 2014 by sampling a little bit of everything on the lake, from the schooling bite to brush piles and even some shallow topwater action. This time, Gagliardi got tunnel vision on the schooling fish on the lower portion of Murray.

"I didn't explore any shallow options this time because in pre-practice the offshore bite was so good you could get bit even during overcast or rainy

days when you'd expect the shallow bite to be good," he says.

The only time Gagliardi deviated from his schooling bite was on the final day when he went into scramble mode and ran up the river to hit 20 or so brush piles before coming back down the lake to target schoolers again and ultimately finish his limit.

"I had more offshore stuff to fish than I could have run the whole event," Gagliardi adds. "I should have run more of it, but instead I'd stay in one spot for 30 to 45 minutes because they were schooling so good. I just like fishing for schoolers too much."



Gagliardi kept his tackle pretty simple. He used a 7-foot, 2-inch, medium-heavy Level rod to fish a single Yamamoto D-Shad soft jerkbait and upsized to a 7-foot, 10-inch, medium-heavy Level rod for throwing a double rig and a pencil popper. The D-Shad wound up being his primary tool of the tournament.

"That 7-2 Level rod is tailor made for it [the D-Shad]," he says. "It has a fast tip and parabolic bend that help with the way I fish because it is almost a crankbait-type bite. I'll rip the bait, and I might know there is one on it and just let the rod load up and absorb shock while I wind down on him."

GAGS STAYS READY FOR SCHOOLERS

Catching schooling fish at times can be easy, but there is no doubt Gagliardi is one of the best at picking off these sometimes fickle fish — a skill set he developed in the summertime on Lake Murray.

"The biggest reason I catch more schooling fish than others is because I'm ready," he says. "You have a very short window once one blows up to get him to bite, and if your bait is there immediately after he blows up then your odds of catching him are astronomically high."

Sometimes the key is to not cast unless a fish is visible at the surface, even if it means waiting minutes at a time without casting.

"Before I even start my day I pull my schooling bait out and hang it over the side of the boat so it is ready to go," he adds. "I even keep my rod in my hand as I pull my trolling motor up and bring it with me as I walk to the console. I'll hold onto it as I drive to the next spot just so that when I stop I am instantly ready to start casting."



MICHAEL NEAL | 46LBS, 11oz



By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTO BY CHRIS BURGAN

Anglers got four days of official practice for this year's Forrest Wood Cup, but for all intents and purposes, Michael Neal only needed the first hour of it.

"I probably could've stopped practicing by 8 a.m. Sunday, and it wouldn't have affected how I finished," Neal says. "I did the same thing I did in 2014 – fish cane piles. And I already had all the waypoints from back then. I just re-checked those. I'd say 80 percent of the spots I fished this year I found in 2014."

Neal estimates he rotated through 40 places each day, making two passes through each spot. His method relied

on efficiency: Neal would pull up, make no more than 10 casts and then move on to the next spot.

"I wasn't fishing more than 10 miles from takeoff, but I burned more than 30 gallons of gas every day," says Neal.

Neal's main weapon was an alewife-colored Big Bite Baits Jerk Minnow on a 5/0 round-bend hook, with a 14- to 18-inch-long leader tied to a swivel, which reduced line twist and added weight for casting. He worked the Jerk Minnow as fast as he could, often making it jump out of the water like a surface lure. He also caught a keeper each day on an American shad-colored ima Little Stick 135.



While bass did come up to the top in his areas, Neal wasn't necessarily targeting surface schoolers – or bass that broke the surface – as others did. He figures only four of the fish he weighed in were schoolers, something that probably hurt his weight.

"I think those schoolers were the bigger fish, and I just didn't have the opportunities to catch them like the other guys did," says Neal. "If I was to do anything different I might try to find more spots where I had more opportunities to catch schoolers, but other than that, I really wouldn't do anything different. It just wasn't my time yet."

NEAL'S KEY TO SUCCESS

There's no substitute for experience under pressure, which is why Neal has made two straight top 10s at the Forrest Wood Cup and three in five tries.

The offshore bite Neal was on was what he calls a "timing deal." If he pulled up on a spot that hadn't just been worked over by another angler he would probably catch fish. However, if he got on the wrong rotation, caused, for example, by inadvertently pulling in after another angler, he might not catch fish. On days one and two he had most of his weight by noon, but on day three he hadn't had a bite by 1 p.m. Now with six Tour seasons behind him, Neal handled the situation with veteran poise.

"Three or four years ago if that happened, I'd have been done," Neal says. "I'd have been so mentally shot. Now, I've learned you can always make adjustments. I did that, got on a better timing late that third day and caught them again."

He finished the day with a 15-13 limit and advanced one spot up the standings.



SCOTT SUGGS | 43LBS, 3OZ



By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Scott Suggs was on the same program as Justin Atkins, Travis Fox and Brandon Cobb, except for one big difference.

"They were on 4-pounders, and I was on 3-pounders," Suggs says.

Known for his prowess with suspended bass – he won the 2007 Forrest Wood Cup targeting suspended fish at Lake Ouachita – Suggs spent most of pre-practice behind the steering wheel. He found about 50 cane piles, and when he cracked 18 pounds in an hour on one of those pre-practice mornings, he knew he didn't have to worry about going deeper during official practice.

Instead, Suggs focused shallow to "give it an opportunity." When the shallow bite never materialized, though, he decided to stay on the lower end, whittling his targets to five cane piles he had all to himself.

The first day his milk run produced more than 15 keepers on crazy chrome- and albino-colored Zoom Super Flukes rigged on weighted hooks.

"I tried double-Fluke rigs and a Front Runner on my pencil popper, but I seemed to catch them better when they [the Flukes] were solo," says Suggs. "That first day I could just cast



the Fluke out when they were busting, or even when they weren't, and they'd eat it. But the second and third days I had to call them up with a topwater."

The surface lure of choice was a chrome Cotton Cordell Pencil Popper, but whether it was the Super Fluke or Pencil Popper, Suggs had to work the lure as fast as he could to get bites.

Suggs rotated through his five areas at least three times every day, letting each area rest at least 20 to 30 minutes. Ironically, the two cane piles he felt would be best never really lived up to expectations, while the one he was ho-hum about outshined the rest.

SUGGS' KEY TO SUCCESS

Since fishing offshore is one of his favorite ways to catch bass, Suggs notes that dedicating himself to the offshore bite proved to be the fastest – though, sometimes hardest – path to success.

Throughout the first two days, Suggs noticed many anglers venturing out deep to check a cane pile or two before running back shallow.

"So many guys lost out on the offshore deal because they didn't lock in on it," says Suggs, who figured out early on that he probably couldn't win fishing both shallow and deep.

Suggs believes the feast-or-famine nature of offshore fishing caused some anglers who fished both deep and shallow to miss critical windows of opportunity over cane piles. For instance, on day one, he had four fish by 11 a.m. Then he hit one of his cane piles at the right time, limited and culled out everything he had. If he'd been splitting time between deep and shallow, he might have missed that key bite window.



SCOTT MARTIN | 41 LBS, 4OZ



By David A. Brown
PHOTO BY CHRIS BURGAN

Committed to the offshore bite, Scott Martin fished from mid-lake to the Saluda Dam and focused his efforts on main-lake points and secondary points with brush piles in 10 to 15 feet and cane piles in 20 to 30 feet. He also found a couple of open-water areas that produced a schooling bite every day.

"I fished the same area all three days and, for the most part, the same 10 to 15 places. I would just rotate them throughout the day," Martin says. "I needed a few more places to really do good because you start educating those fish. After day two, the element

of surprise, as far as your lures, is gone, and they get used to what's going on."

Martin threw a LIVETARGET Yearling Walking Bait in calm conditions and for accurate casts to schooling fish. When the fish snubbed the topwater, he threw a pearl Yamamoto D-Shad on a 5/0 Trokar straight-shank hook.

"Once the schoolers went down, I threw a LIVETARGET [Blueback] Herring swimbait because it was like they were looking around for another bait," Martin says. "A lot of times, for the first 30 to 40 seconds after they stopped schooling, that wolf pack would still be hunting around for herring."



In windy conditions, Martin threw a translucent pencil popper to create more noise and attract more attention. This bait yielded a couple of his larger fish.

He says the brush piles produced when bait schools were closer to the bottom. However, the fish seemed to favor cane.

"The cane is more vertical, so depending on the time of day those fish can suspend at the depth in which they feel most comfortable," he says. "The bait was at different depths based on sun, clouds, water temperature and time of day."

MARTIN'S KEY TO SUCCESS

Finding fish was only part of the challenge. The real key was getting them to bite. To minimize the guesswork, Martin relied heavily on forward-looking sonar to help him identify the position and mood of fish. It's similar to how he made the top 10 at the Cup on Lake Ouachita in 2015, an event where many in the top 20 were also targeting offshore schoolers.

"I could tell [on sonar] by the way the fish were set up in the cane if they were going to bite or not," Martin says. "When they were higher in the cane pile – within 5 feet of the surface – you were going to get a bite. When they were 10 to 15 feet down, you had to do a few things like slow down your retrieve to get them to come up and bite."

Martin says the sonar also showed him how active fish were reacting to his bait. Leveraging this perspective, he would vary his retrieve as needed to turn lookers into biters.



WESLEY STRADER | 34LBS, 2OZ



By Jody White
PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Wesley Strader is a regular at the Forrest Wood Cup, but prior to 2017 he hadn't notched a top-10 Cup finish since 2005. At Murray, he was able to put his versatility to good use, fishing for herring eaters in the main lake as well as targeting shallow bass in a creek far upstream.

Strader started his tournament fishing cane piles on the lower end and came up empty. After running up the creek, father up than any other top-10 pros, he boxed nearly 14 pounds by throwing a spinnerbait and a crankbait in laydowns. On day two, he worked his

way into cut range with fish he plucked from cane piles and schoolers that were breaking over a tapering grassy point in the lake's lower section.

The key point for Strader had submerged grass that topped out about 12 feet below the surface. Bass came up schooling on herring there on days two and three. In the last round they wouldn't bite Strader's topwater, but he crushed them for an hour or so on day two with a bone-colored prototype pencil popper from PH Custom Lures called the Pencil P.

In the creek, Strader says patience was key, and that it sometimes took 20



or more presentations to one tree before a fish would bite it. Though he caught better top-end size in the lake, Strader says the creek he fished was loaded with shad, and that every fish he caught was “plump as all get out.” Because of the abundance of shad, it took some extra work to trigger them to bite an artificial lure.

In the shallows, Strader threw a PH Custom Lures Pooh shallow-running crankbait and a 3/8-ounce chartreuse/white Stan Sloan’s Zorro Bait Co. Wesley Strader Signature Series Bango Blade with a silver No. 4 1/2 Indiana blade and gold No. 3 1/2 Colorado blade.

STRADER’S DECISION-MAKING WAS JUST OFF

Though Strader still chalked up a good finish, he might have been able to make a run at the top five or better with different decision-making. Though he was the only top-10 finisher to really tap the shallow bite, his timing never seemed right.

“I had to call a lot of audibles,” says Strader. “The first day I started out on the cane piles, and I don’t know if I got in a bad rotation or what, but I just didn’t get bit. So, at about 9 o’clock I went back to doing what I like to do [fishing shallow].”

The shallow bite saved him, but for whatever reason the roles reversed on day two, and the offshore bite was strongest.

Strader ended up following the day one plan on the final day after missing a lot of bites, but came back to the lake with only two in the livewell.

Other pros in the top 10 were able to take advantage of afternoon rain and clouds to fire up the schooling fish on the lower end, but Strader got there too late and wasn’t able to capitalize.



AARON BRITT | 31 LBS, 9 OZ

10

By Tyler Brinks
PHOTO BY MATT PACE

In his rookie season on Tour, California's Aaron Britt was one of the last anglers to qualify for the Forrest Wood Cup with a 39th-place finish in the standings. He made the most of it with a top-10 finish by utilizing topwater baits to target bass feeding on blueback herring.

Britt describes his practice as "brutal," but says he caught two quality fish that were busting on herring at his very first stop during practice. There, he found a series of points near Shull Island, approximately six miles south of takeoff. Since he never found anything else during practice,

he spent the entirety of the tournament in this area.

"The points were 8 or 9 feet deep and dropped to 20 or 25 feet, but I was catching suspended fish that were sitting over 13 to 18 feet of water," he says.

There was a three-hour window in the morning with heavy surface feeding, and then the fish would surface roughly every 30 minutes for the rest of the day.

"The first day I would fish near the bottom with plastics, and if they came up chasing I couldn't reel back in fast enough to make a cast with a topwater," Britt recalls. "By the second day, I



was not making a cast until I saw fish busting, and I was literally sitting down on my deck waiting for them to come to the surface.”

Casting accurately was critical for Britt, and he says the key was leading the fish, casting ahead in the direction the fish were chasing herring.

“You could see the herring skipping across the surface, and you would have to make a cast exactly to where the bass was going,” he says

“Generally, sunny conditions are harder to get bites with topwater, but I did best when it was high sun and no clouds.”

BRITT'S GEAR FOR MURRAY

Britt caught the majority of what he weighed in on two different topwater baits, one a bit unusual for the scenario, and the other a bit more common: a 6th Sense SplashBack 90 popper in the 4k shad color and an Evergreen SB-125 pencil popper-style bait in the half-mirror wakasagi color.

“The key was to have a topwater bait with a really obnoxious sound. It had to be loud enough to distract a fish that was about to eat a herring,” says Britt.

Britt also weighed in one fish that he caught on a double-Fluke rig.

Tackle selection was important for making long, accurate casts when opportunities presented themselves. He fished the popper on an iRod Genesis II 733 7-foot, 3-inch, fast-action rod and went with the heavier 734 model for the pencil popper. He paired the rods with a Shimano Curado baitcasting reel (7.1:1) and 50-pound-test Seaguar Smackdown braid, a common line preference for the pros chasing schoolers during Cup week. ■



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12

JEFF SPRAGUE

POINT, TEXAS
25LBS, 15oz

by Colin Moore

Tactics

Lake Murray yielded two limits weighing a combined 25 pounds, 15 ounces for Jeff Sprague, earning the Texas angler 12th place. Indicative of how good the fishing was, had Sprague been competing in the Cup at Lake Murray in 2014 and matched his 2017 catch, it would have put him in second place after two days behind Philip Jarabeck.

Sprague stayed in the vicinity of Dreher Island and ran new water both days. He says he missed the schooling bite and instead worked main-lake shorelines and small coves with topwater, and also targeted isolated docks. The fish repositioned on day two, setting up closer to points as the water continued to drop.

A keeper each day from brush piles helped, but Sprague says that pattern wasn't strong enough to rely on. And by midmorning the buzzbait bite had evaporated, so he switched over to a drop-shot rig. Lost fish and missed opportunities wound up keeping him out of the top 10.

Baits

Sprague fished a Santone buzzbait with a Gene Larew Biffle Bug trailer (green pumpkin candy and jalapeno pepper) on a 6th Sense Lux Edition baitcasting rod (7-3, heavy action) for his morning approach. When he swapped out the buzzbait for a drop-shot, he rigged up a 6-inch Gene Larew TattleTail Worm (Sooner run) and fished it on a 6th Sense spinning rod (7-2, medium-action). Either outfit was loaded with P-Line braid and P-Line Tactical Fluorocarbon leader.

11

BRADFORD BEAVERS

RIDGEVILLE, S.C.
26LBS

by Curtis Niedermier

Tactics

Bradford Beavers' chances of winning were greatly reduced by what he describes as a bad call on the first day, when he weighed in only four fish for 9 pounds, 7 ounces. He started on a mid-lake spot where bass had been schooling on shad in practice, but the school was mostly gone. Beavers suspects the cool-down over practice pushed the shad into the creeks.

He managed to catch one keeper on a buzzbait and then bounced around to points, ledges and brush to scrape up three more keepers with bottom baits. A broken rod cost him his fifth.

On day two, he rebounded with a limit for 16-9 by fishing down the lake on points, cane and other schooling places for herring-eating bass. Though he never cast at a fish that broke the surface first, Beavers easily called up a limit on topwater then culled two with bottom baits that afternoon. In hindsight, he wishes he'd uncovered that program sooner.

"I was down there in pre-practice and I threw a Fluke," Beavers says. "Typically in August they're not aggressive enough to hit a topwater. In practice I went down there and just couldn't get them with the Fluke, and it never dawned on me to throw a topwater. That's what I threw on the second day, and they were coming up no problem."

Baits

For structure fish, Beavers threw a drop-shot, Texas-rigged worm and 5/8-ounce Katch-Her Lures jig. His topwater choice for herring fish was what he called a long "finesse-type" walking bait.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



13

AUSTIN FELIX

EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN.

25LBS, 8OZ

*by Colin Moore***Tactics**

Austin Felix, who was on the University of Minnesota team that won the 2014 YETI FLW College Fishing National Championship, did much better on Lake Murray in his return trip than his inaugural visit when he only caught five keepers in two days and wound up 36th.

Felix put together a solid three-pronged strategy that was less dependent on the ubiquitous herring bite in the main lake that others were tapping.

Each morning, for the first half-hour or so, Felix fished shallow points in about 2 feet of water with a walking bait to pick off random bass before the sun came up and moved them offshore. Starting about 8 o'clock, he would switch to a schooling pattern on three or four points he located in practice. He rotated among them for a few hours, then went back to the bank with a buzzbait and targeted bass set up under docks or in laydowns.

"I had to let my points rest. I'd catch one or two and then leave. The bait would gradually set up around the points again, and the fish would be in the brush nearby," says Felix. "Once I came back and moved up the point, the bait would sort of scatter and get the bass going again."

Baits

Felix alternated between a 6th Sense Dogma walking bait and a pearl Zoom Fluke first thing, before adding an Ever Green Shower Blows pencil popper in blueback herring to his arsenal. His Bass Alarm buzzbait wore a white Zoom Horny Toad trailer.

14

MATT AREY

SHELBY, N.C.

25LBS

*by Kyle Wood***Tactics**

Like many of the top finishers, Matt Arey cashed in on the booming offshore bite in order to claim his fourth top-20 finish in the Forrest Wood Cup.

"I figured out the offshore bite before the cutoff and knew that was what I wanted to focus on for the tournament," Arey says. "Main-lake points and secondary points leading into pockets with some brush or cane piles on them were the most productive for me. Timing was a big deal, and that usually meant getting to a spot awhile after it had been fished, or before someone got to it. You knew if a spot hadn't been hit because you'd get bit almost immediately."

Baits

The Quaker State pro rotated through a plethora of top-water baits and a soft-plastic jerkbait to keep things fresh and catch his limits.

"When it was slick calm, I feel like I got more bites with a silent walking bait," Arey adds. "But when there was more of a chop I'd use one with rattles or a pencil popper. One of the biggest keys was having a fast reel, though. I was working those baits so fast I needed to be able to keep up with the fish when they ate it or burn back when they started busting nearby."

He used a 7-foot, 3-inch Okuma TCS frog/swimbait rod or a 7-foot, medium-heavy Okuma Helios rod, each with a high-speed Okuma Helios reel.





PHOTO BY MATT PACE

16

BRANDON McMILLAN

CLEWISTON, FLA.
22LBS, 12OZ

by Sean Ostruszka

Tactics

Brandon McMillan is a shallow-water angler at heart, and he stayed in the skinny water during the Cup. He'd located 30 to 40 bream beds in the mid-lake section of Lake Murray during practice where he found some quality bass hanging around. Unfortunately, fishing pressure and the moon might have pulled many away.

"I think being on the backside of the full moon, those big fish left the shallows," McMillan says.

On day one, he still was able to pull seven keepers off bream beds, but by day two, all those fish were gone, compelling him to burn the banks faster than he'd ever fished before.

"I burned through six batteries on day two," McMillan says. "My foot never came off the trolling motor other than to put on a new bait or take off a fish."

Baits

A 4x4 Buzz Bait Extreme with a Zoom Horny Toad was McMillan's one and only tool for the Cup. He modified the buzzbait by swapping in a smaller blade.

"This way it was still heavy enough for me to skip it, but I could then burn it even faster with that small blade," says McMillan. "I actually taught myself how to skip docks at this event."

When it was sunny, he used a white Horny Toad and switched to grey ghost when it was cloudy.

15

ANDREW UPSHAW

TULSA, OKLA.
23LBS, 15OZ

by David A. Brown

Tactics

In practice, Andrew Upshaw found success with a shallow frog bite and by drop-shotting shallow grass. However, his tournament came down to a mix of fishing topwater for schoolers and fishing docks. The key was adjusting to changing conditions.

"Throughout practice and the last couple of weeks [before the tournament], the water had been dropping a lot, and I figured out that the shallow bite was dwindling," Upshaw says. "The fish were moving off the banks and going up under the adjacent docks."

Upshaw developed a sub-pattern for his dock fish, noting the better action came on docks with multiple boats tied up, a boat lift or any built-up structure that cast more shade. Lake Murray's regulations limit dock size for new structures, so older docks with more substantial structure proved most attractive.

"By the end of the second day, I was just running big docks," Upshaw says. "I'd catch a fish off every one of them."

For his topwater bite, Upshaw focused on long, flat points where bass chased blueback herring. He found that the bass would position shallower than stripers, so he'd find the latter first and then move in closer for his target species.

Baits

Upshaw caught his fish on a Rat-L-Trap StutterStep 4.0 in the silver surfer color, a green pumpkin Gene Larew Bass Shooter rigged on a 1/8-ounce weighted hook, a green pumpkin stick worm wacky rigged on a 2/0 hook and a green pumpkin Gene Larew Three-Legged Frog rigged on a Mustad double frog hook.



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17

LARRY NIXON

BEE BRANCH, ARK.
22LBS, 2OZ

by David A. Brown

Tactics

"The General" kept it simple with a strategy focused mainly on targeting surface-breaking fish with a Heddon One Knocker Spook and a pencil popper. However, the detail work depended on distance and fish activity.

"If I was working something that wasn't that long of a cast, I was doing better with the Spook than the pencil popper," Nixon says. "You can throw the pencil popper so much farther, and you don't know where they're going to break. So 90 percent of the time, if I was standing at ready and looking for breaking fish, I had that pencil popper in my hand because I could get more distance."

Nixon says the Spook enabled him to work a spot longer than the pencil popper. The latter requires significant movement for its designed action, while the former can simply twitch over a smaller area – a valuable tactic for early mornings, when Nixon could target predictable schooling spots.

Fishing down the lake, within five miles of the takeoff, Nixon found his best action over 15 to 22 feet of water. When his topwater bite stalled, Nixon worked cane piles with a shaky head. Unfortunately, sunshine on day two really hampered the surface activity, and Nixon landed only two keepers to back up a strong day-one total of 17-13.

Baits

Nixon's topwater baits were a Heddon One Knocker Spook in a shad pattern and an Evergreen Shower Blows pencil popper in blueback herring. He fished the cane piles with a 3/16-ounce shaky head and a green pumpkin 6 3/4-inch Yamamoto Pro Senko.

18

CODY MEYER

AUBURN, CALIF.
22LBS

by David A. Brown

Tactics

Cody Meyer started the tournament by keying on blueback herring, but several missed chances steered him in a different direction midway through day one. He got several topwater bites, but the fish either missed the plug or shook free. Meyer then decided he needed a changeup.

"About 10 o'clock I went shallow. I started throwing a buzzbait and caught a small limit," Meyer says. "I fished the buzzbait around bluegill beds and skipped it under docks. Anywhere you had both of those together, it was great."

"I got some good bites that way in practice, but I should have known that with the falling water, that pattern was going away. The second day I realized the only way I could have a good bag was to throw a topwater [offshore]. I went out there with one rod and literally threw it all day."

Despite multiple opportunities, day two yielded only five fish, but at least a bigger bag moved Meyer up the standings. His targets were about 30 cane piles planted in 25 feet of water. The cover held a lot of bass, and the California pro drew strikes by walking his lure at a brisk pace directly over the piles.

Baits

Meyer caught his day-one fish on a white 1/4-ounce Strike King Tour Grade Buzzbait fitted with a 3 3/4-inch Strike King Rage Swimmer – also in white. For his topwater work, he fished a Strike King Sexy Dawg in the sexy chrome color.



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20 JEREMY LAWYER

SARCOXIE, MO.
21 LBS

by Tyler Brinks

Tactics

Lawyer admits that he completely missed the herring bite. He had never fished on a lake with herring, and because of that, he focused his efforts on fishing shallow riprap banks in the Saluda and Little Saluda rivers.

He fished parallel to the riprap, keeping his boat very close to the bank. The best stretches had slightly deeper water – approximately 4 to 5 feet – and Lawyer found more submerged rock in the extra depth. He also caught fish on flat clay points where the riprap ended.

“I had a good practice, but the fishing was getting worse each day,” he says. “The first day of the tournament was overcast late into the morning, and that helped keep the fish shallow, but the second day was calm and sunny, and it made things tough.”

The key for Lawyer was to rotate through lures while covering water. His junk-fishing approach led to a limit of 10 pounds, 5 ounces on the first day and 10 pounds, 11 ounces on the second day.

Baits

Lawyer estimates he had 15 rods on the deck, and several baits produced for him. His key lures were a Freedom Lures buzzbait with a Zoom Horny Toad, Zoom Z Craw Jr., LIVETARGET BaitBall Glass Minnow Popper and JaKKed Baits DoKK RoKK jig. He also caught fish on a shaky head, drop-shot and soft stick bait. ■

19 SHANE LEHEW

CATAWBA, N.C.
21 LBS, 3 OZ

by Jody White

Tactics

Fishing fairly familiar patterns not far from home, Shane LeHew might have had a better tournament if day two had not gone so disastrously.

“I had between 25 and 30 blowups,” says LeHew of the second round. “I was throwing the same bait as everyone else, and I think I hooked seven of them and landed two. I ran, like, 10 cane piles in a row and had a bite on every one of them. It seemed like it just wasn’t my time to catch one.”

LeHew did catch a 3-pounder from under a dock on the first day, but for the most part he stuck to the offshore game. He ran a succession of cane piles as did many of the other top finishers, but mixed in some schooling places as well. He shared his best schooling area, which was a big shoal in the middle of the lake, with Anthony Gagliardi, but didn’t quite time it right on day two and wound up missing the cut.

Baits

Like many other anglers, LeHew relied on a chrome-colored ima Little Stick 135, but he also caught one keeper on a Shane’s Baits Straight Buzzin’ in-line buzzbait rigged with a white toad. Another came from a cane pile on a Zoom Fluke.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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5 MORE CUP OBSERVATIONS

LESSONS LEARNED ON LAKE MURRAY

In his article on page 42, FLW Field Editor Rob Newell did a great job of breaking down Justin Atkins' winning pattern, as well as explaining the makeup of the "cane piles" that produced several top finishes at Lake Murray. Yet, there were other tactical storylines from the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup that ultimately impacted how all 53 pros wound up.

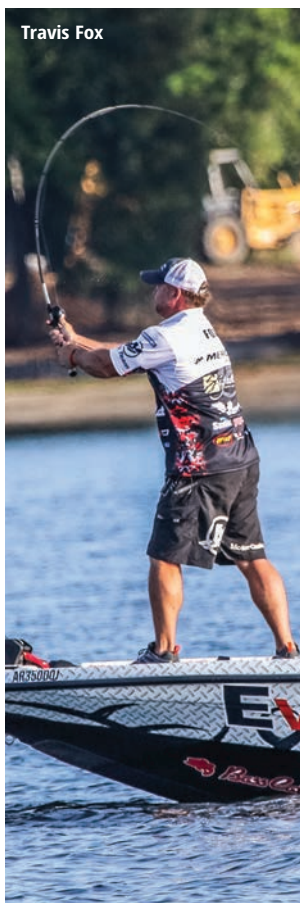
By Curtis Niedermier

1 THE PENCIL POPPER PHENOMENON

The pencil popper style of top-water bait is rooted in inshore salt-water fishing, primarily for striped bass, but it's also been a tool for black bass fishing for many years.

Yet prior to the Cup, the pencil popper had never had a tournament bass fishing breakout moment. That changed when Atkins used one exclusively for his win and the other nine pros in the top 10 all revealed that they used one at least part of the time. As a result, pencil poppers sold out on most major online tackle retail sites in the weeks following the Cup.

The keys to the pencil popper's effectiveness at Murray were the commotion it makes and the distance it can be cast. Generally large in size (nice for mimicking a big blueback herring), a pencil popper will launch, and its long profile and cupped mouth create a splashy overhead action that bass can find in the fray of a schooling episode, or track from down below. Having three hooks (usually) also helps to get surface-breaking fish in the boat.



Travis Fox



2 FAST-WALKING ACTION

Atkins says he mostly employed a moderate cadence when walking his pencil popper over cane piles, even slowing it down to a methodical side-to-side crawl when the water's surface slicked off. On that front, he's the exception among top pros. For most, a fast-as-you-can-work-it retrieve yielded the best results.

Eleventh-place finisher Bradford Beavers, a South Carolina resident with some experience on blueback lakes, fished a "standard" stick bait-style walking plug at top speed for a good second-day catch.

Beavers says the crazy-fast, splashy cadence is a key to drawing the attention of bass when they're zoned in on bluebacks or calling them up long distances, but it also keeps bass from realizing that the artificial isn't the real thing in clear waters. At times, he says it's not even necessary to work the bait from side to side consistently. When bass chase bluebacks up to the surface, the baitfish often skip and skitter away at a fast clip, entering and exiting the water as they go. A half-skittering, half-walking presentation accurately mimics that action.

Beavers says a soft jerkbait – the other favorite bait among top finishers – can be fished the same way, both under the surface and right on top.

3 WHY THE SHALLOW BITE STUNK

Save for Wesley Strader, no one in the top 10 benefitted much from the shallow bite at Murray, which is a stark departure from the two previous Cups that were held in the month of August on the lake.

Pros weighed in with several theories on why that was, and the consensus is that a brief cool-down during practice, coupled with heavy rains, retarded the water temperature's climb to traditional peak August levels and oxygenated the water offshore to the point that bass simply didn't have to leave. In previous years, the shallows were more attractive because offshore surface waters heated up, and wave action along the shore oxygenated the water there, attracting bait and bass.

Gagliardi also believes the bass were somewhat fooled into thinking it was fall, which is when the cane pile bite is usually best at Murray. Certainly, bass don't reason in such a way, but the notion that their seasonal movements were thrown off by the unseasonal conditions has merit. And with the offshore bite being so strong, pros simply had no reason to go play the bank-running game to try and catch one here and one there over vast swaths of water when they could target specific spots where their electronics showed them there were fish.



5 DIFFERENT KINDS OF SCHOOLERS

The term "schoolers" was tossed around quite a bit at Murray, typically to refer to bass that were breaking the surface, but not every fish that was deemed a schooler was engaged in the same type of activity. Some came up simultaneously in groups to chase blue-back herring, or even shad in some parts of the lake, in typical schooling form. Others came up a fish or two at a time at random when an unfortunate baitfish fled to the surface. And then there was the staggered-but-consistent morning schooling activity that Atkins, Cobb and Fox dialed in on for some of their better catches.

During periods of more consistent surface activity, some pros found it more effective to not cast unless fish were visible up top, in order to be ready to fire out at just the right moment. Otherwise, the time it took to wind in a bait that was already in the water might have caused them to miss the window of opportunity.

Though Atkins primarily kept his bait in the water, Fox adjusted on the final day and worked the wait-and-cast program. Top-10 finishers Anthony Gagliardi and Aaron Britt did the same almost exclusively. ■



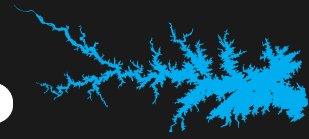
4 THE RUN-AND-GUN CANE PILE GAME

One of the more interesting aspects of the cane pile program is that, while the fish will group together on cane, most pros only caught a fish or two at a time from each spot and then had to leave the spot to rest or wait awhile for the fish to set back up. It seemed that when one fish attacked a topwater walked over the cane, the rest of the bass came with it – literally following the action and being pulled away from the cover.

Atkins and third-place finisher Brandon Cobb recognized what was happening and adopted a blitzing run-and-gun strategy, where they made a few casts at each spot and then buzzed on to the next one. Even when they caught a fish, Atkins and Cobb didn't stick around too long, save for a period early in the mornings when they both targeted schoolers breaking in their best areas.

Eventually, after a spot had rested, the pros cycled back through again. For Cobb, who led the tournament after two days, a large crowd of spectator boats chasing him on day three might have scattered and spooked his fish, preventing the bass from returning to the cane as they otherwise would have and throwing off his timing.

BREAKING DOWN THE LAKE MURRAY CUP



THEN

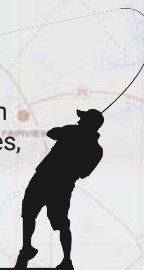
\$99,686: Justin Atkins' career earnings before the 2017 Cup.

NOW

\$400,086: Justin Atkins' career earnings after the 2017 Cup.

A BIT ABOUT BRYAN THRIFT

Bryan Thrift has fished the Forrest Wood Cup 11 times in as many seasons. He's made the top 10 a record nine times, including the last six in a row, which is also a record.



THE LONG HAUL



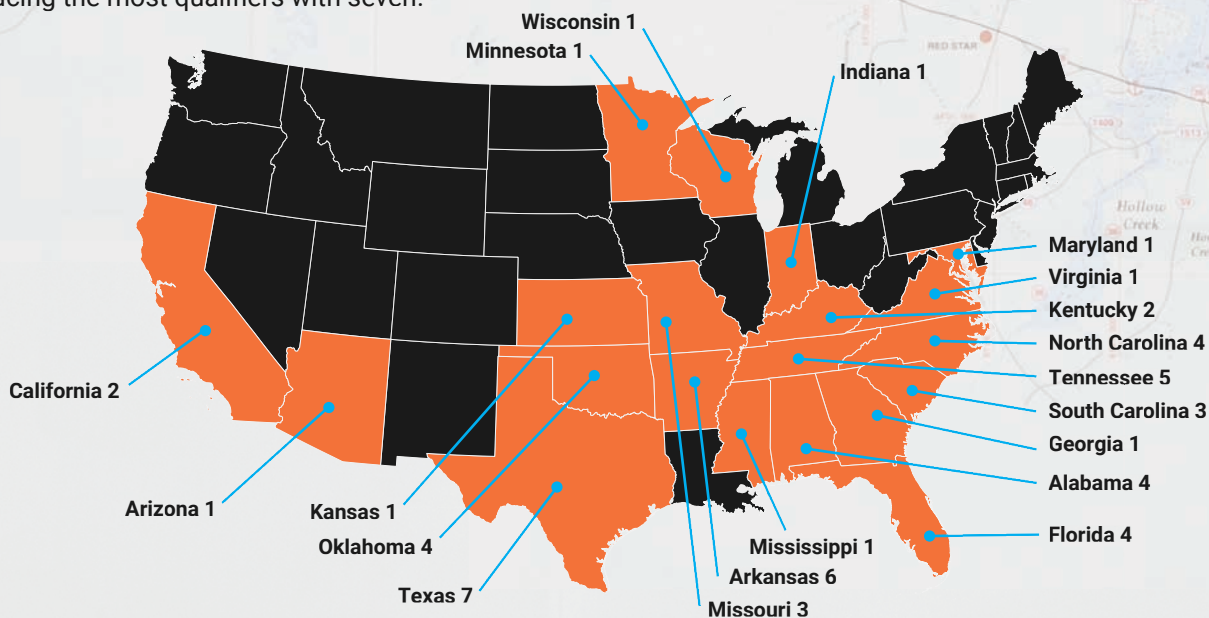
Hyo Chul Kim, FLW's first International Division representative at the Cup, travelled more than 7,100 miles from South Korea to Columbia, S.C., to compete.

MOST MONEY EARNED IN CUP COMPETITION WITHOUT A CUP WIN

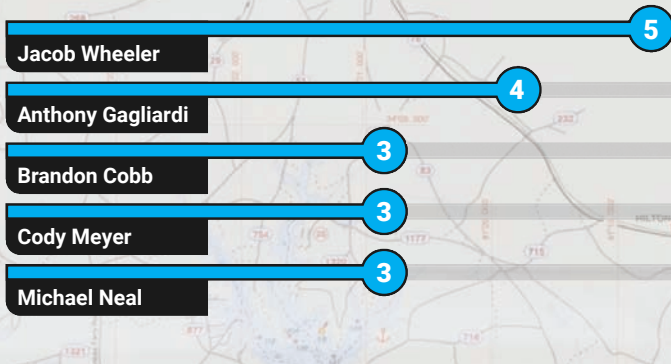


STATE BREAKDOWN

The Cup field included anglers from 20 states, with Texas producing the most qualifiers with seven.



MOST CUP TOP 10s BEFORE AGE 30



MEGA-MURRAY

The quality of the fishing at Lake Murray surprised everyone this year. But how good was it?

A NEW AVERAGE DAILY WEIGHT RECORD

Justin Atkins' average daily weight of 19.75 pounds surpassed David Fritts' previous record for highest average daily weight at a Cup, which he set in 1997 with 18.14 pounds per day on Lake Ferguson.

BIG STRINGERS GALORE

The 2017 Cup also produced five of the 10 heaviest single-day weights in Cup history. Lake Murray has now produced seven of the top 10. Here's the full list:

- 23-01 – David Fritts – 1997 – Day 4 – Lake Ferguson
- 22-01 – Justin Atkins – 2017 – Day 3 – Lake Murray
- 21-15 – Jacob Wheeler – 2012 – Day 1 – Lake Lanier
- 21-11 – Travis Fox – 2017 – Day 3 – Lake Murray
- 21-05 – Justin Atkins – 2017 – Day 1 – Lake Murray
- 21-01 – Anthony Gagliardi – 2017 – Day 1 – Lake Murray
- 20-02 – Steve Kennedy – 2014 – Day 4 – Lake Murray
- 20-02 – Mark Rose – 2008 – Day 1 – Lake Murray
- 19-15 – David Fritts – 1997 – Day 1 – Lake Ferguson
- 19-12 – Brandon Cobb – 2017 – Day 1 – Lake Murray

COMPARING TO PAST MURRAY CUPS

The Cup has been held on Murray three times, in 2008, 2014 and 2017. The first two were four-day tournaments, but this year's Cup was a three-day event.

Year	Winner	Winning Weight	10th-Place Pro	10th-Place Weight	Average Daily Weight of Winner
2017	Justin Atkins	59-04	Aaron Britt	31-9	19-12
2014	Anthony Gagliardi	51-02	Jacob Wheeler	33-7	12-12
2008	Michael Bennett	52-03	Jay Yelas	29-6	13-01

BREAKING DOWN THE FIELD

- ▶ **Past Cup Champs:** John Cox, David Dudley, Anthony Gagliardi, Scott Martin, Darrel Robertson, Scott Suggs
- ▶ **Rookies of the Year:** Zack Birge, Scott Canterbury, Bradley Dortch, Shinichi Fukae, Scott Martin, Scott Suggs, Bryan Thrift, Clark Wendlandt
- ▶ **First-Time Cup Qualifiers:** Kyle Alsop, Justin Atkins, Bradford Beavers, Aaron Britt, Joey Cifuentes, Marshall Deakins, Bradley Dortch, Travis Fox, Christopher Jones, Hyo Chul Kim, Casey Scanlon, Andrew Upshaw
- ▶ **Anglers of the Year:** David Dudley, Shinichi Fukae, Anthony Gagliardi, Scott Martin, Andy Morgan, Bryan Thrift, Clark Wendlandt
- ▶ **Oldest:** Darrel Robertson, 67
- ▶ **Youngest:** Kyle Alsop, 23

YOUTH NOT WASTED ON THE YOUNG

Cup champion Justin Atkins is 27 years old, but he's not the only young gun to do well at this year's Cup. Three other pros age 30 or younger at the time of the Cup made the top 10: Brandon Cobb (27), Michael Neal (25) and Aaron Britt (30).

The 2004 Cup's top 10 also included four anglers age 30 or younger: Luke Clausen (26), Scott Martin (28), Anthony Gagliardi (27) and Glenn Browne (28).

Four is not the record, however. In 2016 at Wheeler Lake, half the top 10 was age 30 or younger. The list includes John Cox (30), Michael Neal (24), Jacob Wheeler (25), Chris Johnston (27) and Brandon Cobb (26).

The 2000 Cup was the only one where all of the top 10 pros were over the age of 30.



KEY AREAS OF THE TOP 10



The Upper End Was Mostly Quiet

At the 2014 Cup on Murray, pros fishing the Saluda River, Little Saluda River and upper end of the lake in general had a bigger impact on the outcome. Most fans recall that Anthony Gagliardi, who won that event, caught his final-day stringer down near the dam, but he actually sampled some brush piles and other areas on the opposite end of the reservoir throughout the event. Also, Steve Kennedy nearly mounted a final-day comeback up the Saluda. This time, save for Wesley Strader's day-one catch of 14 pounds, 6 ounces, there were no big stringers to speak of from the upper section. And even Strader could only scratch together the one limit upstream.

WHERE THE FORREST WOOD CUP'S TOP PERFORMERS CAUGHT THEIR FISH AT LAKE MURRAY



Justin Atkins



Travis Fox



Brandon Cobb



Bryan Thrift



Anthony Gagliardi



Michael Neal



Scott Suggs



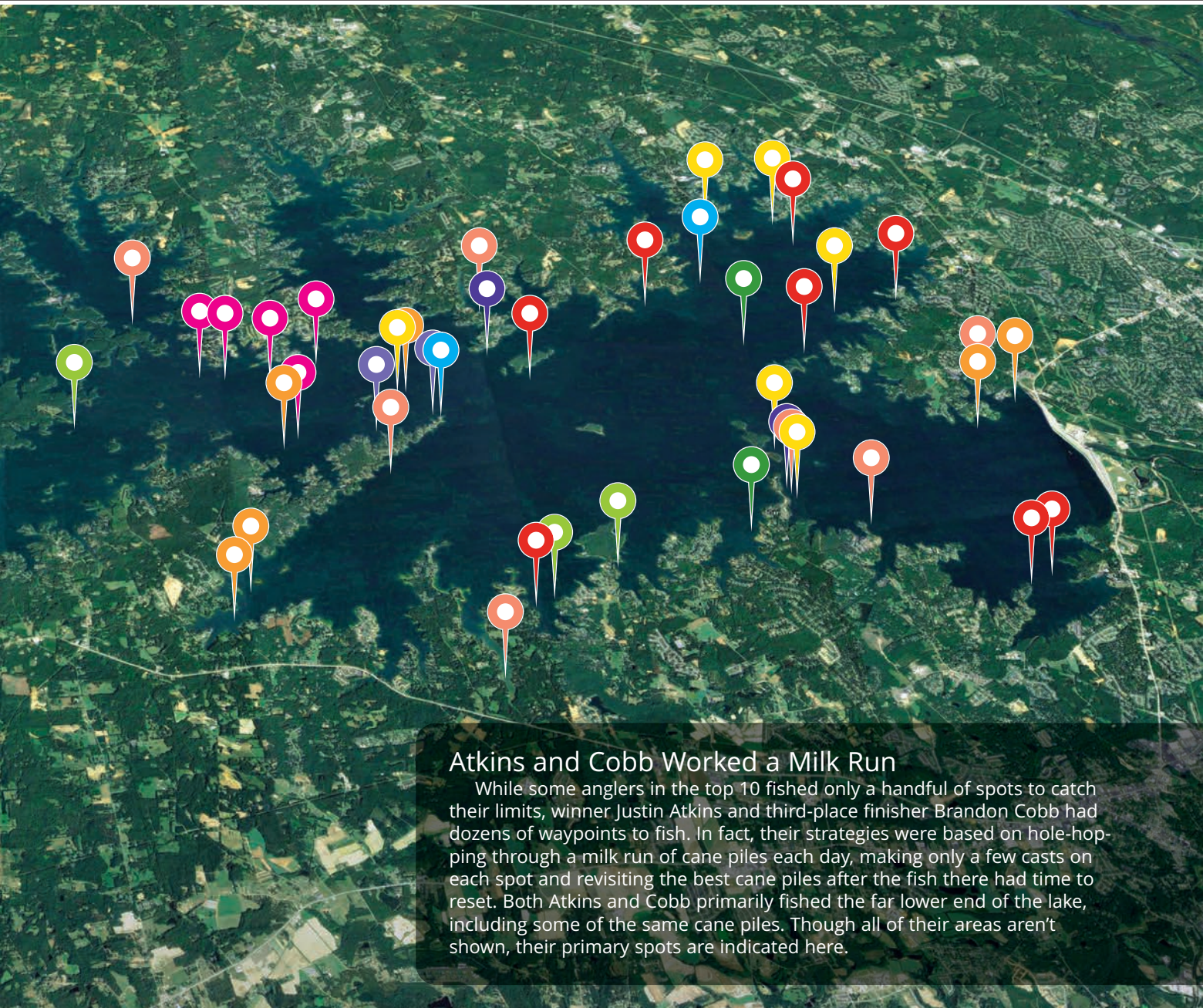
Scott Martin



Wesley Strader



Aaron Britt



Atkins and Cobb Worked a Milk Run

While some anglers in the top 10 fished only a handful of spots to catch their limits, winner Justin Atkins and third-place finisher Brandon Cobb had dozens of waypoints to fish. In fact, their strategies were based on hole-hopping through a milk run of cane piles each day, making only a few casts on each spot and revisiting the best cane piles after the fish there had time to reset. Both Atkins and Cobb primarily fished the far lower end of the lake, including some of the same cane piles. Though all of their areas aren't shown, their primary spots are indicated here.



TOP 10 TACKLE

1. ATKINS: ima Little Stik 135 – chrome; **2a.** FOX: ima Little Stik 135 – American shad; **2b.** FOX: Strike King Sexy Spoon; **2c.** FOX: Storm Arashi Top Walker; **3a.** COBB: Yo-Zuri 3DB Pencil – prism ghost shad; **3b.** COBB: Yo-Zuri 3DR Pencil – real glass minnow; **3c.** COBB: Yo-Zuri Hydro Pencil – blue tiger; **3d.** COBB: Zoom Super Fluke – glimmer blue; **4a.** THRIFT: Paycheck Baits The One; **4b.** THRIFT: Damiki Finesse Miki; **5.** GAGLIARDI: Yamamoto D-Shad – olive shad



6a. NEAL: Big Bite Baits Jerk Minnow – alewife; **6b.** NEAL: ima Little Stick – American shad; **7a.** SUGGS: Cotton Cordell Pencil Popper – chrome; **7b.** SUGGS: Zoom Super Fluke – crazy chrome; **7c.** SUGGS: Zoom Super Fluke – albino; **8a.** MARTIN: Yamamoto D-Shad – pearl white; **8b.** MARTIN: LIVETARGET Yearling Walking Bait; **8c.** MARTIN: LIVETARGET Blueback Herring Swimbait; **8d.** MARTIN: Evergreen Shower Blows 105; **9a.** STRADER: PH Custom Lures Pooh; **9b.** STRADER: PH Custom Lures “Pencil P” – bone; **9c.** STRADER: 3/8-ounce Stan Sloan’s Zorro Bait Co. Strader’s Signature Series Bango Blade – white/chart with No. 4 1/2 silver Indiana and No. 3 1/2 gold Colorado; **10a.** BRITT: 6th Sense SplashBack 90 – 4K shad; **10b.** BRITT: Evergreen SB 125 – half mirror wakasagi

At The Show

Off the Water at The Forrest Wood Cup

1



2



3



4





PHOTO BY CHAD LOVE

5



6

PHOTO BY JUDITH ALLEN



7

PHOTO BY COLIN MOORE



8

PHOTO BY COLIN MOORE



9

PHOTO BY COLIN MOORE

1. Florida entertainer Easton Corbin and his band got the crowd revved up prior to the final weigh-in with a free show that featured some of the country singer's greatest hits. 2. Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Updike and Sergeant First Class Brian Wright of Fort Bragg brought the Forrest Wood Cup to the weigh-in stage. 3. Barbeque ribs, pulled pork and brisket were on the menu for hungry visitors to Bass and BBQ outside the Expo. 4. "The Blond One," pro Jimmy Houston, drew big crowds to his fishing seminars. 5. Several pros visited patients at the Palmetto Health Children's Hospital before the tournament. 6. Cohen Campbell Fish Hatchery was barely big enough to accommodate all the youngsters that participated in the FLW Foundation Unified Fishing Derby. 7. Mike Thompson, center, won the Jackson Kayak Coosa HD given away after Saturday's weigh-in. Thompson is flanked by Lamar Advertising General Manager Scott Shockley and Quaker State's David Lerch. 8. Dan Shively, national fisheries manager for the U.S. Forest Service, accepted the award for Best of Show in Wildlife Forever's 2017 State-Fish Art contest on behalf of Washington 9th-grader Annalisa (Siyu) Liu. Program Manager Karen Hollingsworth made the presentation. 9. Stanley Lindler of Little Mountain, S.C., took home the fully outfitted Ranger Z521C powered by a 250-hp Evinrude that was given away after the championship weigh-in. LJ Smith from WCOS 97.5 FM hosted the Ranger Boat giveaway ceremony.



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FLW TOURNAMENT COVERAGE AND RESULTS

ON TOUR



**WHAT'S INSIDE:
A LAKE ONTARIO SMALLMOUTH
SLUGFEST AT 1000 ISLANDS**

How the top finishers figured out a stingy Potomac River

Meet the 2017 YETI FLW College Fishing All-America Team

Adrian College takes two of the top three spots at Chautauqua

High School Fishing: The country's best duke it out at Pickwick in a big-limit championship

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



DETAILS

July 27-29, 2017

Presented by Evinrude

Hosted by Clayton Chamber of Commerce

Costa FLW Series Division: Northern

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1000 ISLANDS

CLAYTON, N.Y.

By Jody White

PHOTOS BY CHARLES WALDORF

Winning Angler

Matt Becker, Finleyville, Pa.

Winning Weight: 66-04 (15 fish)

Stat Line: Becker's 25-2 final-day bag was one of four limits of more than 25 pounds weighed in over the course of the tournament. This was the Costa FLW Series rookie's first win.

Winning Baits

Becker only needed one bait to get the job done on the big smallmouths he plucked from Lake Ontario: a green pumpkin/white laminate Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm fished on a drop-shot with a 1/2-ounce weight.

Target Areas

Given the option to stay in the St. Lawrence River or run out into Lake Ontario, Becker chose the lake for almost all of practice and the entirety of the tournament. He focused on the edges of offshore flats and shoals in the area around Galloo Island.

"I scouted pretty much everything in the lake," says Becker of his decision to live in the southeast part of the lake. "The main reason I settled in that area was because I had the most spots in a close area that I could rotate through if one of

them wasn't on. I had one spot here and one spot there up north, but if it's rough you can't run to them all."

Becker fished sharp breaks where shoals plummeted from 20 or 30 feet deep into the basin as well as more gradually sloping flats, where he moved in and out from 20 to 30 feet deep. For the sharper stuff, he tried to drift right along the edge, but on his flatter areas he started shallow in the morning and worked deeper in the afternoon as the sun rose.

The common theme for all his spots was the presence of good rock and willing smallmouths that he marked on his Lowrance.

Keys to Victory

Becker's commitment to Lake Ontario was probably the most important aspect of his win, and it enabled him to have a shot at a truly huge bag on the final day when he caught 25 pounds, 2 ounces to close the gap and took over the lead.

"I live in Pittsburgh, so I fish Erie a bunch, and Ontario is identical to Erie," says Becker. "I spent all my time on the lake looking around. I figure if you're going to beat any of these guys you have to do what you're good at."

Fishing vertically and efficiently was important as well. Instead of simply drifting over a swath, Becker lined himself up to go over key areas, and would reel up lightning-fast to drop on fish he marked.

"I was dropping [vertical fishing] on every one of them," says Becker. "I did catch a few just flipping out in front of the boat when I wasn't marking them, but 90 percent of the ones I weighed, I dropped it straight on their head."

"It took me a little bit to figure out where to position my bait to drag right into where the fish was. But once I figured that out, I could get it right through where I marked them and they would eat it almost every time."



A basic drop-shot produced all of Becker's winning weight.

CO-ANGLER CHAMPION

Name: Gary Haraguchi
Hometown: Redding, Calif.
Winning Weight: 53-02 (15 fish)
Winning Program: Haraguchi's day-one partner Jason Kervin suffered a breakdown on the way from the river to the lake. Despite being able to fish for only a short time, Haraguchi still scratched out a limit. Then, on the final two days the ever-smiling co-angler smashed them with a Yamamoto Shad

Shape Worm on a drop-shot and a 5-inch Yamamoto Pro Senko rigged wacky style on a 5/16-ounce Frenzy Baits Whack-A-Sack jig. ■



CONDITIONS

Weather | some rain and clouds the morning of day one; otherwise clear and sunny

Air Temperature | mid-50s to upper 70s

Water Temperature | upper 60s to low 70s

Water Clarity | 15 feet

Wind | strong and from the west on day one; strong and from the northeast on day two; lighter and from the northeast on day three

Moon Phase | waxing crescent
Predominant Lake Features | boulders, drops, large deep and shallow flats, and grass in most of the bays

Fishery Type | Great Lake and large Northern river



WHY THE RIVER TOOK A YEAR OFF

Leading up to this year's Costa FLW Series tournament at 1000 Islands, the St. Lawrence River was on everyone's mind. Not only had Scott Dobson dominated for two days on the river the year before, but the Bassmaster Elite Series was fresh off a river derby where 20-pound bags were commonplace. When the dust settled, only one of the top-10 pros had stuck with the river for more than a fish or two, and the rest trekked to Lake Ontario.

One of the best at the 1000 Islands, Cal Climpson was on some fish in the river prior to the tournament, but he made the cut largely based on an excellent day one out in the lake.

"I think the big thing was the weather we had in the tournament," says Climpson of the river's failure to produce. "That was the No. 1 factor in my opinion. I think in the river, at least for me and the Elites, a lot of guys were on shallow fish on rock and sand. Later in July, when you get cold fronts or an unusual wind it really causes those river fish to pull off the shallow spots, and they actually suspend in the main river. Then they're very tough to target and hard to even find."

Dobson would readily agree that conditions weren't ideal for a shallow bite in the river. It was mostly windy and rainy on day one, and on day two a stiff east wind kept the river very choppy. He finished 38th.

Out on the lake, the fish were set up deeper and were less affected by the weather changes. Instead of trying to visually spot a waning population up shallow in bad conditions, the pros could look to their graphs and drop down on unsuspecting smallies. ■



DETAILS

Aug. 24-26, 2017
Presented by Plano
Hosted by Charles County
Board of Commissioners
Costa FLW Series Division: Northern



POTOMAC RIVER

LA PLATA, MD.

By Jody White



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

CONDITIONS

- Weather** | overcast on day one; otherwise clear and sunny
- Air Temperature** | mid-60s to low 80s
- Water Temperature** | mid-80s
- Water Clarity** | 1 to 3 feet, but dirtier in places due to recent rains
- Wind** | fairly strong from the north on days one and two; light and from the north on the final day
- Moon Phase** | waxing crescent
- Predominant Lake Features** | coontail, milfoil, hydrilla, lily pads, docks and laydowns
- Fishery Type** | Mid-Atlantic tidal river

Winning Angler

Mike Hicks, Goochland, Va.

Winning Weight: 48-10 (15 fish)

Stat Line: This was Hicks' eighth top-10 finish on the Potomac River in FLW competition

Winning Baits

Hicks mixed it up all week, but swapping topwaters and adding a swim jig to the lineup on the final day assured his win. He threw a black Lobina Rio Rico popper the first two days and then switched to a perch-colored Team Daiwa TD Pencil (shown above) in the calmer waters of the final day. His swim jig of choice was from Lil' Hustler Tackle Company, and he trailed it with a Reaction Innovations Skinny Dipper.

Hicks caught a few on a split-shot rig at the end of day two, and also added fish on a vibrating jig from Lil' Hustler and a Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Target Areas

Hicks says he typically tries to stay away from community holes, but the popular grass beds in front of Aquia Creek produced the bulk of his weight, especially in the mornings. He started all three days of the tournament throwing a topwater around topped-out grass near the mouth of Aquia and added a pair of key fish from that area by throwing the TD Pencil late in the morning on day three.

Hicks also picked up a bunch of weight in pads bordering the channel in the back of Potomac Creek on day one. On days two and three, he finished his limit up north with a split-shot rig and the TD Pencil by focusing on shallow depressions with a clean bottom and current in the flats in the backs of creeks.

The Virginia angler didn't make a special effort to fish places that he had to himself, and he didn't commit to hammering one or two grass beds as others in the field did either. In the end, his decision to move around left him on top when his competitors ran out of fish on their primary spots.

Keys to Victory

Hicks didn't focus exclusively on running the tide, but as usual the Potomac's tidal fluctuations did factor into his decisions, more so in the afternoons than in the mornings. On day one he fished the back of Potomac Creek as the tide was dropping, staying so long that his motor overheated five times from idling through mud as he worked back out. He also ran to areas with falling water to finish out days two and three. On the final day, the first depression he hit in the afternoon had no water movement, and rather than staying, he left it in search of a falling tide.

Another critical component of Hicks' success was being adaptable. He picked up a swim jig on the final day after chugging his Rico along for an hour or so with no results. Two casts later he put a 4-pounder in the boat. Later in the day, Hicks dropped the Rico in favor of the super-subtle TD Pencil to finish his limit with three more quality fish. Both bait changes had history – swim jigs are killer on the Potomac, and Hicks enjoyed success with the TD Pencil in previous years. Even so, with the water being calmer and clearer on the final day, he needed to adjust. He made the right call. On day three, Hicks was the only angler to break the 12-pound mark. With 16-14, he got the win in style.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



CO-ANGLER CHAMPION

Name: Richard Perez

Hometown: Naples, Fla.

Winning Weight: 28-03 (12 fish)

Winning Program: Perez won his title with a pair of time-tested Potomac staples: a Yamamoto Senko on a Texas rig with a 1/8- or 1/16-ounce weight and a black Lobina Rio Rico popper, which produced his bigger bass.

"If it was bright and sunny out I couldn't get bit on the topwater, but as soon as it got cloudy or there was a little bit of wind I'd pick it up and wouldn't put it down," says Perez. "That's when the better bites came, and that's what did it for me."



WHAT MESSED UP THE FISHING?

After a summer of truly excellent fishing on the Potomac, most anglers figured the fishing would be really good for the Northern Division finale. That was definitely not the case, as only winner Mike Hicks brought more than 12 pounds in on the final day and several of the Potomac's heavy hitters, including Chris and Cory Johnston and Bryan Schmitt, failed to muster a limit on the second day of competition.

The theories about why the fishing was so tough varied considerably. For most anglers, the blame landed on the dirtier water up near Washington, D.C. and the seldom-heard complaint of "too much grass." Particularly, the Johnston brothers would have preferred canopies of milfoil rather than the huge and impenetrable hydrilla mats that covered swaths of some of the bays.

Hicks believes a summer of pressure simply got to the bass.

"All of the tidal rivers do this when you start getting toward August," he says. "Those fish stay in their summer places from the end of May until the middle of September. So they have a lot of chances to get beat on, and they get educated. I just think the fish are a lot smarter than what we give them credit for."

Schmitt believes the issue was the tides, excess grass growth and a slight high-pressure system.

"It was bad because something with the solar eclipse had the tides running extra hard, and then there was a slight high-pressure change," says Schmitt. "It was pretty good in practice, and even the day before the tournament it was really phenomenal, but anytime you get a full moon or a new moon [the

new moon was a couple days before the tournament], it might not make the tides as high or as low, but usually it makes them rush really hard in or really hard out. Especially in July or August when there's a lot of grass, the fish feel that, and they just bury up. They don't want to fight that."

"The tide was definitely cranking during that tournament," adds Hicks. "It was different on days one and two. Normally I can judge the level pretty close off the day before, but I could tell things were a little different. More than anything, it was not a good tide for tidal-water fishing. A good tidal-water fisherman will typically want to fish the last two hours of the tide. Those four hours of low water are the best, and if you look at the tide charts, we never saw much low water, and we didn't see it at all on the final day." ■



BFL WINNING TACTICS

Buckeye – Ohio River – July 15

Boater: Chris Martinkovic, Hamilton, Ohio – 9-02

Flipping a D&L Tackle Advantage Jig (black) with a Zoom Super Chunk Jr. trailer (black) to flooded wood in less than 2 feet of water

Co-angler: Colton Lindsey, Raymond, Ohio – 5-11

Great Lake – Mississippi River – July 22

Boater: Brandon Gann, Sparta, Wis. – 10-14

Targeting lily pads and duckweed mixed with clean water in Pool 8 backwaters with a SPRO Bronzeye Frog

Co-angler: Kevin Anderson, Ettrick, Wis. – 10-04

Great Lakes – Mississippi River – Aug. 19

Boater: Mike Brueggen, La Crosse, Wis. – 14-11

Targeting scattered weeds in about a foot of water in Pool 9 using a 3/8-ounce buzzbait (black) in the morning, and then fishing the buzzbait and a SPRO Bronzeye Frog around scattered weeds in Pool 10 in the afternoon

Co-angler: Tony Seiler, River Falls, Wis. – 11-14

Hoosier – Patoka Lake – July 29

Boater: Blake Albertson, Bloomington, Ind. – 20-11

Fishing rock on a main-lake point using a Secret Lures J-Bend Tail Shaker Jig with a Zoom Trick Worm (motor oil) and a 1/2-ounce Secret Lures MVP Football Jig, and fishing bushes in a cut in Lick Fork Creek with a Texas-rigged Yamamoto Senko (green pumpkin magic)

Co-angler: Albert Burns, Greendale, Ind. – 12-11

Hoosier – Ohio River – Aug. 26

Boater: Todd Hensley, New Albany, Ind. 7-04

Flipping stumps in shady areas along a 200- to 300-yard stretch in the back of a creek on the Kentucky side of the river using a 7-inch Berkley PowerBait Power Worm (blue fleck) and a Zoom Ultra Vibe Speed Craw (blue fleck)

Co-angler: Kevin Napier, Lewisport, Ky. 4-04

Illini – Ohio River – July 22

Boater: Chad Diedrich, Nashville, Ill. – 15-09

Fishing slack-water areas in the Lake Barkley tailwaters (after locking through and running to the Cumberland River) with a Wave Worm Tiki Stick (watermelon red flake), then fishing a spinnerbait near a laydown closer to takeoff

Co-angler: Adam Brookman, Bonnie, Ill. – 9-05

Illini – Lake Shelbyville – Aug. 19

Boater: Jeremy Mull, Chatham, Ill. – 22-01

Flipping isolated trees and stumps on the main lake and in coves using a Texas-rigged Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver (green pumpkin) with a 3/8-ounce weight, and fishing a brush pile in 16 to 18 feet on a small main-lake point with a Zoom Trick Worm (red bug) on a 5/16-ounce Buckeye Lures Spot Remover jighead

Co-angler: Aaron Arning, Walnut Hill, Ill. – 13-02

LBL – Kentucky/Barkley – July 15

Boater: Drew Boggs, Lebanon, Tenn. – 24-11

Fishing south of Paris Landing, dragging a prototype Jenko Fishing jig on ledges and flipping shallow wood with a Big Bite Baits Craw Tube (tilapia) with a Jenko Fishing Creature Weight

Co-angler: Jim Pierce, Medon, Tenn. – 16-02

Michigan – Lake St. Clair – July 15

Boater: Erick Hodgins, Amherstburg, Ontario – 23-11

Targeting weedbeds in 18 to 20 feet on the Canadian side using tubes by Mike's Rx Baits and Xtreme Bass Tackle (green pumpkin, watermelon) or a Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm (baby bass) on a drop-shot rig

Co-angler: Hugh Cosculluela, The Woodlands, Texas – 22-00

Michigan – Lake St. Clair – Aug. 5

Boater: Lance Tresenriter, Syracuse, Ind. – 23-06

Fishing mid-lake in 16 to 18 feet of water and a spot in Anchor Bay, targeting areas with grass and perch with a LureCraft The Original "D" (smoke purple) on a drop-shot rig and a Rapala DT10 crankbait (perch)

Co-angler: Justin Sawyer, Dearborn Heights, Mich. – 20-11

Michigan – Detroit River – Aug. 19

Boater: Cody Kelley, Portage, Mich. – 23-09

Dragging a V&M Smallie Tube (green pumpkin) on a small section of scattered rock in 25 feet of water in Lake Erie

Co-angler: Mike Raber, Wolcottville, Ind. – 22-08

Northeast – Oneida Lake – July 15

Boater: Grae Buck, Harleysville, Pa. – 18-00

Targeting individual cruisers in 9 to 12 feet around a mix of grass and rock by dragging the rocks with a Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm on a drop-shot

Co-angler: Jason Dubernas, Old Forge, Pa. – 18-06

Northeast – Lake Champlain – Aug. 5

Boater: Dale Gorrell, Hatfield, Pa. – 21-04

Fishing a Z-Man Finesse T.R.D. (black and blue) on a Ned rig in a 200-yard stretch of backwater with a 10- to 12-foot-deep hole

Co-angler: Ronald Tracy, Marlton, N.J. – 17-04

Shenandoah – James River – July 22

Boater: Ben Jacobi, North Chesterfield, Va. – 16-10

Fishing small feeder creeks near the mouth of the Chickahominy River with a 1/4-ounce buzzbait, and flipping a Texas-rigged green pumpkin soft plastic while running the tide

Co-angler: Victor Riveras, Newport News, Va. – 12-08



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2017 YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING ALL-AMERICA TEAM

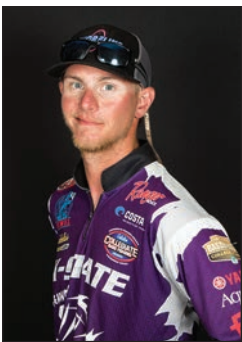
FLW was the first organization to recognize outstanding collegiate fishing accomplishment when it created the YETI FLW College Fishing All-America Team in 2010, at the conclusion of the first FLW College Fishing National Championship.

Now in its eighth iteration, the All-America Team is comprised of arguably the best collection of collegiate bass anglers of all time – testament to the growth of the sport

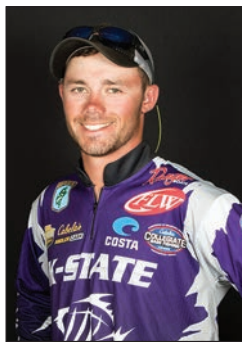
at the college level and a greater degree of experience among those who made the cut.

Earning a spot on the All-America Team begins with regular-season competition, and concludes at the National Championship. Competitors earn their slots based on their finishes.

This season, FLW recognizes 30 anglers – 15 two-person college teams – as All-America anglers.



Kyle Also
Kansas State University



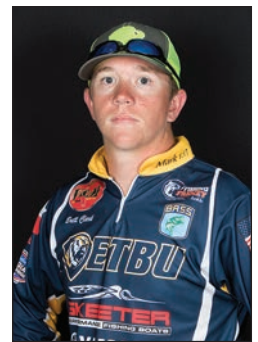
Travis Blenn
Kansas State University



Gettys Brannon
Univ. of South Carolina



Chandler Christian
Murray State University



Brett Clark
E. Texas Baptist University



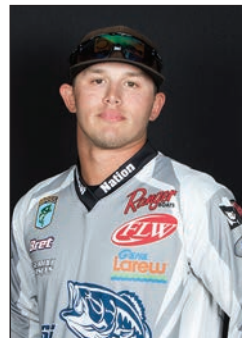
Jeff Roman
Clayton
Mississippi State University



Connor Cohran
Bryan College



Gabriel Dubois
University of Missouri



Bret Fite
Rogers State University



Ryan Fluharty
Mansfield University



Lance Freeman
Murray State University



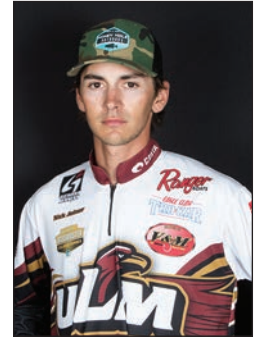
Tyler Grabowski
Mansfield University



Ryan Habenicht
University of Oregon



Brandon Heizer
University of Missouri



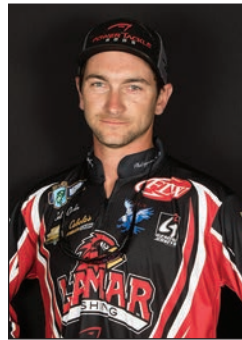
Nicholas Joiner
Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe



Jacob Keith
E. Texas Baptist University



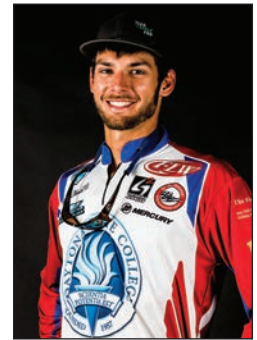
Daniel Marshall
University of Oregon



Colby Ogden
Lamar University



James Oltorik
Daytona State College



Thomas Oltorik
Daytona State College



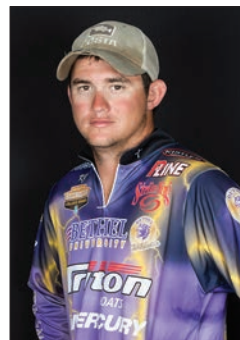
Evan Owrey
Bethel University



Cody Peak
Mississippi State University



Logan Pollman
Slippery Rock University



Kristopher Queen
Bethel University



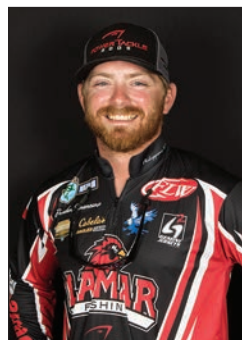
Dillon Roberts
Rogers State University



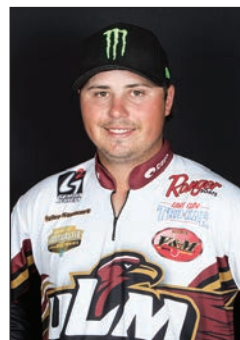
Cole Sands
Bryan College



Tyler Sheppard
Slippery Rock University



Brandon Simoneaux
Lamar University



Tyler Stewart
Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe



Patrick Walters
Univ. of South Carolina



YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING WINNING TACTICS

By Chad Love

NORTHERN CONFERENCE – CHAUTAUQUA LAKE – JULY 22

Concentrating on patches of green grass after their primary pattern failed to produce was the key for Adrian College anglers Jarrett Martin and Zachary Graham, who won the YETI FLW College Fishing Northern Conference tournament on Chautauqua Lake presented by Bass Pro Shops with a 16-pound, 3-ounce five-bass limit.

“During practice for Chautauqua Lake our pattern started off focusing on the little bit of rock that was in the lake,” says Martin, a senior studying business administration. “The day before the tournament we checked the weather and saw that it was going to be overcast the majority of the day, so we decided to focus on topwater and faster moving soft plastics.”

After an hour fishing the rock with no bites, Martin and Graham decided to abandon the pattern and continue down the shoreline. The plan was to fish whatever shoreline vegetation they could find, but the lake had recently been sprayed, and the pair had a hard time finding enough green grass to fish.

“Most of it was brown and dead, but we found some green grass right near some rock, so we decided to stick with that grass in order to get bites,” says Martin.

“We were fishing on the north end of the lake,” adds Graham, a sophomore double majoring in environmental studies and geology. “We found a stretch of bank with no docks with a long rocky flat. About 40 yards off of the bank the rock would meet the grass, and we just worked the grass line all day long.”

The team’s tournament day change of plan paid off. Within an hour, throwing an XCalibur Zell Pop (Martin) and a Bugsy’s Baits USA Sic Minnow (Graham), the team had boated a limit and began culling, eventually catching an estimated 20 keepers.

“I think the key for us was the cloud cover,” adds Martin. “If it would have been sunny, the fish would have been in the shade. But the way the clouds were, the bass were in the mood to eat all day and were extremely active.”



Jarrett Martin (left) and Zachary Graham

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STUDENT ANGLER FEDERATION'S 2017 GRAND FINALES

PICKWICK LAKE HOSTS HIGH SCHOOL'S BEST FOR NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP, WORLD FINALS

By Colin Moore

High school teams from Arkansas and Tennessee were the big winners in the Student Angler Federation's High School Fishing World Finals and National Championship on Pickwick Lake in late June, but all of the 332 teams that participated got a piece of the prize pie. More than \$170,000 in scholarship money, fishing equipment, and assorted electronics and gift cards were presented to the teams.

The National Championship, which ran concurrently with the World Finals, featured 142 teams that qualified through a series of tournaments that began at local levels and advanced through state championships and open events. Those teams were included in the World Finals event, which was open to all SAF competitors.

Hunter Davis and Tyler Allenbrand of Mount Ida (Ark.) High School won the National Championship with a three-day total of 53-06, while Cal Culpepper and Mason Waddell of Harris County (Ga.) High School were second with 51-08. In the World Finals, Jon David Bedford of nearby Lawrence County High School and Walker Brown of Loretto High School, also in Lawrence County, Tenn., won with a final-day sack of 24-09. Hayden Reed and Brandon Johns of Summit High School in Spring Hill, Tenn., were runners-up with 22 pounds.

Moving Targets

Ledge roulette was the routine for most of the teams from 33 states that competed in the two events. Local stick Randy Haynes' pre-tournament observation that Pickwick's ledge fishing might be "on again, off again" because of a temporarily altered generation



Tyler Allenbrand (left) and Hunter Davis

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

schedule at the dam proved to be prophetic. Though some current was flowing during the early afternoon each day, it wasn't certain or sustained. Likewise, the weather was unsteady, characterized by passing showers and

cloudy weather that seemed to make bass less likely to stay in place.

For the Mount Ida Lions and the Tigers of Harris County, Ga., it eventually amounted to whose supply of fish held out the longest. Late on day two, Davis



Walker Brown (left) and Jon David Bedford

and Allenbrand, who were coached by Davis' father, legendary Bassmaster Elite Series pro Mark Davis, returned to a spot they had fished in practice and found that it apparently hadn't been exploited by others. Before they started fishing it, they had two largemouths for about 8 pounds, but dragged Strike King football jigs with Strike King Menace Grub trailers (green pumpkin) to fill out their limit at "the green buoy" hole along the main channel. They returned to the weigh-in at McFarland Park with a 23-pound, 10-ounce limit on day three, which gave them 53-6 for the tournament.

Meanwhile, seniors-to-be Culpepper and Waddell had been milking a ledge in about 12 feet of water across the lake from the old Colbert County Steam Plant and upstream from Kroger Island. After the second day, the Georgia anglers had a lead of just over 2 pounds ahead of Tankersley and Nicholson (36-09 to 34-02), and 5 pounds better than eventual third-place finishers Hunter Nanney and Jake Kimbrough of the North Mississippi Student Anglers (31-05). In the championship round, though, Waddell and Culpepper could only muster a limit totaling 14-15, and finished behind Davis and Allenbrand with 51-08. The Georgia pair fished Texas-rigged Zoom Ol' Monster worms (black grape) with 3/8-ounce weights and caught most of their fish from a ditch lined with shells and grass. Kimbrough and Nanney brought in 19-06 on day three for 50-11 overall. They fished a variety of jigs and soft plastics and ran a ledge milk run.

The heaviest bass of the tournament – and the week – was a 9-pound, 11-ounce behemoth caught on a crankbait by Kyle Roy of a Russell County (Ky.) High School team.

The World Finals

Saturday, weights were zeroed for the World Finals for 31 teams that included the top 10 from the National Championship, 20 from the World Finals semi-final round and "second chance round," plus a "lucky dog" team whose name was drawn the previous evening at The Bass Federation's annual pizza party.

Despite it being a typical weekend, with little current flowing down the lake, and following three days of hard fishing, Pickwick was still good for a few pro-quality stringers. Bedford and Brown paced the field with 24-09, and behind them Reed and Johns, though one bass shy of a limit, still placed second with 22-0.

Central Florida anglers Fisher Omans and Steven Steinard, used to fishing shallow water with lots of grass in it, made the best of an unfamiliar fishing scenario and scored a third-place showing with 20-04.

After a slow start and losing two solid keepers right off the bat, sophomores Bedford and Brown settled down and took advantage of a midmorning feeding flurry on a ledge between the bridge and Waterloo. They alternated Jenko Fishing Booty Shaker Swimbaits (white with golden belly) and Davis jigs with Strike King Rage Craw trailers (green pumpkin). Runners-up Reed and Johns fished shallow cover in Coffee Slough with Zoom Brush Hogs in a variety of dark colors to amass their stringer. ■

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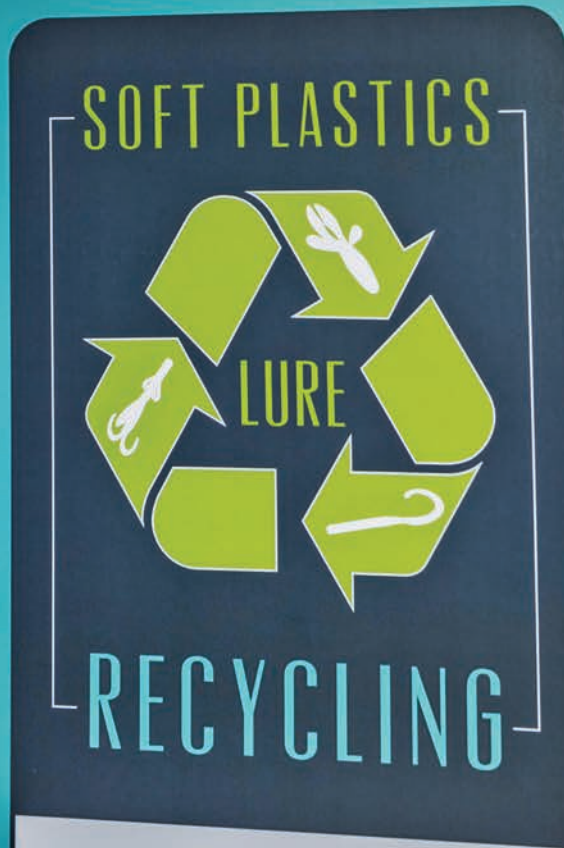
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TBF



WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

PRINCE WINS JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

Syler Prince conquered a tough bite and hard-fishing field of the nation's top youth anglers to win The Bass Federation's 2017 Junior World Championship (JWC) Aug. 11-12 on South Carolina's Lake Wateree.

The no-entry-fee event featured 11- to 15-year-old state champions from 36 state federations and offered more than \$10,000 in prizes and scholarships.

On day one of the two-day event, which coincided with the Forrest Wood Cup on nearby Lake Murray, the junior anglers fished against competitors from their own TBF divisions for a chance to advance to Saturday's final round. Each angler was paired with another contestant and an adult boat captain, who piloted the boat, but didn't fish.

Lake Wateree provided the perfect proving ground. The 13,700-acre reservoir offered plenty of elbowroom and a variety of fish-holding cover and structure, ranging from shoreline vegetation to docks, bridges and offshore sweet spots. Adding to the challenge, the lake's largemouth bass uncharacteristically played hard to catch.

Prince, of Palatka, Fla., started his bid for the title by leading the Southern Division with two bass weighing 4 pounds, 4 ounces.

"Today went really well," he said after the day-one weigh-in. "I didn't miss any fish. I did what I wanted to do. I had the bites that I needed, and I got it done."

Meanwhile, the Mid-Atlantic Division's Jeremy Toler of Oceana, W.Va., sacked day one's heaviest weight with three



A strong second day spent flipping grass pushed Syler Prince to the top of the Junior World Championship.

Final Standings (Listed with day-two catch):

1. Syler Prince, Palatka, Fla., Southern Division, 8-14 (4)
2. Jeremy Toler, Oceana, W.Va., Mid-Atlantic Division, 3-10 (2)
3. Nicholas Frumkin, Lincoln, Mass., Eastern Division, 1-8 (1)
4. Dalton Smith, Brandon, Miss., Central Division, 0-0
5. Matagi Fa'avale, Coalville, Utah, Western Division, 0-0
6. Reece Fisher, Westfield, Ind., Northern Division, 0-0

bass for 7 pounds, 6 ounces. Next was Dalton Smith of Brandon, Miss., who paced the Central Division with two bass for 4 pounds, 14 ounces.

In the Western Division, Matagi Fa'avale of Coalville, Utah, advanced with one bass weighing 3 pounds, 1 ounce. Reece Fisher of Westfield, Ind., sacked a lone fish weighing 2 pounds, 2 ounces to lead the Northern Division, while Nicholas Frumkin of Lincoln, Mass., topped his Eastern Division rivals with a single bass weighing 1 pound, 14 ounces.

Weights were zeroed on day two, giving all finalists a fresh start in the championship round.

Prince threw a topwater popper along a seawall early in the day to pick up one bass, then targeted weedy main-lake banks with the same soft bait that had carried him through on day one.

"I tried other presentations, but it turned out flipping' the grass was what I needed to do," he says.

His go-to rig included a green pumpkin crawdad-style bait with a 1/2-ounce tungsten weight, bobber stop, bead and flipping hook.

"I put my head down and just kept fishing," he adds. "I basically never sat down except for the boat ride."

The approach paid off with three more keepers for a total weight of 8 pounds, 14 ounces – enough for Prince to claim the coveted JWC crown.

"This is great. It feels awesome," he said after being crowned the champ. The title earned him a \$3,000 college scholarship.

Winning the JWC is a major accomplishment, and Prince hopes the feat constitutes one of many memorable milestones in a bass fishing career that's just beginning.

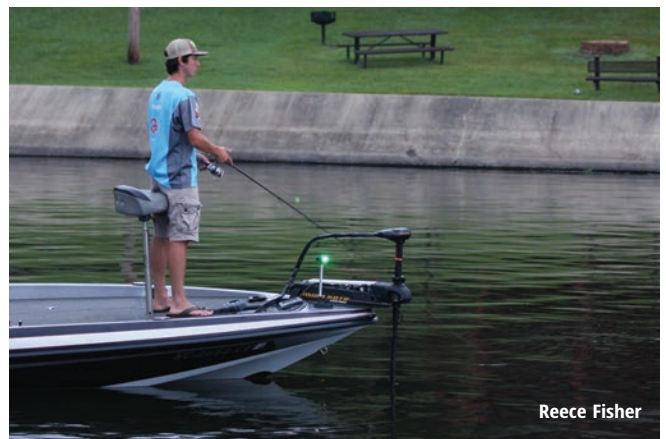
Currently in seventh grade, the talented 12-year-old looks forward to high school and collegiate fishing competitions. And considering that other TBF junior anglers have gone on to compete on the FLW Tour and in the Forrest Wood Cup, Prince's student angler achievements could be just the beginning. ■



Dalton Smith



Matagi Fa'avale



Reece Fisher



Jeremy Toler



Nicholas Frumkin

2017 STATE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE YIELDS CHANGES TO JUNIOR, ADULT PROGRAMS

The mantra “Recruit, Retain, Resource” was front and center when representatives of The Bass Federation’s state federations gathered for the TBF 2017 State Leadership Conference in Camden, S.C., Aug. 11-12.

With that three-pronged goal in mind, the Federation passed a number of resolutions aimed at expanding TBF’s highly successful youth and National Semi-Finals programs.

Youth Opportunities Enhanced

On the youth front, the state presidents council – with input from all youth directors, conservation directors and others in attendance – unanimously approved several changes to the TBF Junior Angler program.

Junior anglers will now fish out of their own boats in two-person teams, accompanied by their own boat captains, at qualifying events and the Junior World Championship (JWC). Rules on pairings and captains will be similar to those of the Student Angler Federation’s High School Fishing program.

Previously, anglers competed individually at the JWC, but were randomly paired with another competitor from their division and a volunteer boat captain, and they fished in the volunteer’s boat.

The JWC was also expanded to three days. Beginning with the 2018 event, all teams will fish for two days, after which the field will be cut to the top six teams from each division for the final day.

“Junior anglers and their families have requested these changes numerous times,” says TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge. “So we’re expecting an overwhelmingly positive response. In fact, when the new format was announced on stage during the 2017 JWC at Lake Wateree, S.C., the crowd of young anglers and their families reacted with cheers and applause.”

The TBF Junior Angler program age group was also adjusted, removing the lower limit of 11 to allow all youths ages 15 and under (as of Aug. 31 of the JWC competition year) to participate. Rules mandating that junior clubs be tied to a TBF adult club were also eliminated, effective immediately. Junior dues will remain at \$25 per year, while scholarships and prizes will more than double for 2018.

State presidents also voted to continue the tradition of timing the State Leadership Conference to coincide with the JWC and Forrest Wood Cup. For 2018, the conference and JWC will run Aug. 8-11 in Hot Springs, Ark.

Small Adjustments

TBF leadership approved a new sliding scale method for determining how many anglers a club can advance to its National Semi-Finals event.

Previously, each club could advance one boater and co-angler, regardless of club size, to the National Semi-Finals. Under the new sliding scale system, TBF clubs in good standing with up to 19 members will send one boater and

one co-angler to the event. Another boater and co-angler advance for every 10 additional club members. For example, clubs with 20 to 29 active members advance two boaters and two co-anglers, clubs with 30 to 39 active members advance three boaters and co-anglers, and so forth.

“The sliding scale rewards larger clubs and offers clubs of all sizes incentives to continue growing, while removing any temptation to split a club to gain extra spots in a National Semi-Finals event,” says Cartlidge.

The new advancement system takes effect in 2018, as 2017 National Semi-Finals events have already begun.

State TBF leaders also voted to add another practice day to all National Semi-Finals events in 2018. Lakes will be off limits Monday and Tuesday of tournament week, with practice allowed Wednesday through Friday. Competition days will be Saturday and Sunday.

Conservation on the Agenda

TBF leaders also discussed a number of conservation and state permitting items, as well as best fish care and handling practices, including recommended procedures for different states and regions.

“We also reviewed a number of studies conducted by state agencies and academic groups on the impact of tournaments on bass populations,” Cartlidge adds. “Overall, every study discussed at the conference revealed that tournaments have negligible effects on bass fisheries. If TBF clubs follow our simple, basic rules of courtesy and fish care, public perception will match the hard data, and we will all be better off.”

The conference also touched on a variety of other topics, including the many benefits of TBF and FLW membership, internal and external communications, marketing, member retention, and more.

“Across all levels of the Federation, our members, staff, volunteers and leadership want TBF to remain the leader in grassroots tournament bass fishing,” Cartlidge says. “The work that we accomplished collectively at the 2017 conference will go a long way to ensure that we do.” ■



Robert Cartlidge (right) is joined on the Forrest Wood Cup stage by Hank Parker following the 2017 Junior World Championship and State Leadership Conference.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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Apparel might not be as exciting a subject as the latest developments in sonar or fishing lures, but clothing that keeps you comfortable while protecting you from elements can be equally critical to your bass fishing success.

For example, if you skimp on raingear and get caught in a bitter cold downpour this fall, you could end up all wet, leaving you two choices: Either fish in misery, or head back to the dock.

The market is flush with rainwear options, which can make wading through the sea of choices an intimidating proposition. To find an outfit that fits your style of fishing without getting soaked, keep your shopping efforts simple by starting with a brand you trust.

Next, look for key features that can mean the difference between staying dry and getting wet. Top options include windproof, yet breathable fabric with waterproofing membranes; gusseted knees and sleeves; adjustable cuffs; an oversized hood to accommodate a cap or helmet comfortably; storm flaps over zippers; and enough smartly placed pockets to hold pliers and other fishing necessities.

The Guidewear Men's Advance Parka and matching Advance Bibs from The Bass Federation sponsor Cabela's meet and exceed such criteria.

Both are made from 100-percent polyester – with woven face and tricot backing – and feature a waterproof, breathable, seam-sealed GORE-TEX shell, which sheds rainfall while establishing a windproof barrier. To keep water from running up the sleeves, the cuffs (neoprene on the parka) sport hook-and-loop cinching.

Other amenities of the Advance Parka include vented three-piece hood with tall, adjustable collar; zippered underarm openings to control ventilation; articulated, ergonomically designed elbows; and tool pockets and attachments.

The Advance Bibs offer a two-way zipper with easy-relief fly system; additional pockets inside and out; swiveling, quick-release suspenders; thigh-length leg zippers; articulated knees; and reinforced seat and knees to resist abrasion at primary wear points.

You won't find high-performance raingear of this caliber on the bargain rack. But if you're serious about bass fishing even in polar bear weather, the purchase of premium gear that gives you an advantage regardless of the conditions is a sound investment.

Check it out at cabelas.com. ■



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JUSTIN ATKINS

Florence, Ala.

By Sean Ostruszka

How many phone calls have you gotten since winning the Cup?

Enough that I can't get anywhere far away from a phone charger.

I can't even imagine. What have the last few weeks been like?

A blur. It's been an awesome experience, especially to see all the support. It's been great to have all the interest in Justin Atkins. I don't refer to it as fame, but more that people are interested in who I am and getting to know who I am. I have a unique story, and it's been cool to share that.

You say it's been a blur. Do you even remember much from the Cup?

I remember being on stage and the weigh-in, but it's still kind of like, "Did I dream that?" And that whole hour of catching fish the final morning is just a total blur.

What was it like rooming with Brandon Cobb the night before that final day, with him in first and you in second?

Actually, we'd stayed together all week, but somehow when we booked our room the dates got messed up. So we actually had to check out Saturday.

He has a buddy who offered to let us stay with him, but my wife and parents had driven up, so I ended up staying with them, and him with his buddy.

Did that make things easier?

It did for that night. We'd been great the whole week. We avoided fishing-related topics and would talk about other stuff.

That final day was tough, though, knowing I was competing against him. I wanted to win, but you don't want to do it at the expense of your best friend.

You've had quite the summer. You got married, bought a dog and won the Cup. Surely, this has been the busiest stretch of your life, right?

Absolutely. Hands down. No question. Right after the Potomac is when my life got crazy. I got married. Then we [he and wife, Tessa] were in Mexico for our honeymoon. We got back [to Florence, Ala.] and moved into our new house. Then I immediately left for pre-practice on Murray. I came back, and I barely remember what I did those two weeks other than get the dog [Zeus, a black Lab]. Then I turned around and went back to South Carolina, and now I'm here.

Speaking of your wife, what did Tessa think when you said you wanted to go pro this year?

I'll be honest, she and my parents were reluctant at first. She and I weren't even engaged at the time, though we knew we would be.

I knew this was my opportunity, and there would never be a better time to try it. If it didn't work out, we're young enough that we could recover. She thought about it for a while, and eventually she said go for it.

So when did you realize you might be able to hang with the pros?

It was at Lake Travis. I'd never seen the lake before. There's no history on it. So I had no clue. Then the first day I caught them really good and was in sixth. That's when I thought, "You can do this."

You mentioned after you won the Cup that you expected it to happen eventually. How'd you predict that?

It's all I've worked for all my life. You get out what you put in, and I knew what I'd put in. Now, I didn't know it was going to happen my first year, but it's what my sights have always been set on. I'm a believer that "luck" is when preparation meets opportunity. ■

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