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Opening Drive

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The Lure of Fishing

By Jesse Reeves

These are dynamic times for bass fishing. “Dynamic” may seem an odd term against popular visions of the activity’s past—quiet country weekends on a placid lake as grandfathers teach grandkids—but the sport is experiencing rapid growth. Professional fishing in leagues such as Bassmasters and FLW are seeing huge payouts not only for the top competitors, but for fans who are following the action online as well.

RECORD EVENTS

Bass fishing found itself in the sports news this summer as the 77-year-old record for biggest largemouth bass was challenged. Since 1932, George Perry’s 22-pound, 4-ounce largemouth bass reeled in at Montgomery Lake in Georgia has been the Mount Everest for bass anglers. And in early July, Japanese angler Manabu Kurita caught a 22-pound, 5-ounce giant that is awaiting international certification. Caught in Japan’s Lake Biwa, it would technically just tie Perry since new records must top the old by at least 2 ounces. However, simply approaching the record has caused plenty of ripples in the sport.

This may be an auspicious time for the old record to be surpassed, as bass fishing is transforming into a multimillion-dollar enterprise with big-time sponsorship deals, well-known competitors and legions of fans who travel far to catch the action on the lakes.

Much of that action is put on by two of the largest bass fishing organizations: Bass Angler Sportsman Society (BASS) and FLW Outdoors. Each holds large tournaments that attract professional anglers who take to the water and vie for millions of dollars in prize money.

BASS is a membership-based organization founded in 1967; today, it has

more than half a million members. In 2001, ESPN bought the group, and it now broadcasts BASS fishing on its television channels and websites. The tournament trail has various stages—Bassmaster Elite Series, Bassmaster

event of the year and is usually held in late July or early August.

BASS FISHING, LOUISIANA STYLE

For BASS, the Bassmaster Classic is the premier annual event, which has soared from humble beginnings to worldwide attraction. The most recent classic was held in Shreveport-Bossier City, Louisiana, this past February, the largest event of any kind—sporting or otherwise—ever to be staged in northwestern Louisiana.

More than 137,700 anglers and spectators attended the three days of the event, said Mary Ann Tice, executive director of the Shreveport Regional Sports Authority. That included more than 100,000 people who attended the fishing tournament’s corre-

sponding expo, the largest event ever held at the Shreveport Convention Center. “You can imagine our delight at the crowds that showed up,” Tice said. “Studies show that more than 70 percent of classic attendees come from an area farther than 50 miles. We wanted a quality-of-life event for the area, but we knew that an economic impact would happen if those out-of-town tourism numbers came in, and they did.” The economic impact for the event was estimated at \$25 million.

The \$1.2 million purse was the big catch for the anglers, with \$500,000



An angler’s boat is towed by a Toyota truck at the 2009 Bassmaster Classic Weigh-in Show at the CenturyTel Center in Bossier City, Louisiana. An expo in Shreveport also drew record crowds.

BASS Communications

Opens, Academy Sports and Outdoors Women’s Bassmaster Tour—but the biggest draw is the Bassmaster Classic, typically held every February amid some of the biggest fanfare in fishing.

FLW stands for Forrest L. Wood, the founder of Ranger Boats and the man generally regarded as the designer and developer of the modern bass fishing boat. FLW Outdoors oversees fishing tournaments across the country televised on Versus Country and sponsored by many corporations, including Wal-Mart, the world’s largest retailer of fishing gear. The FLW Cup is its biggest



going to winner Skeet Reese. Usually the classic has 50 anglers competing, but this year there were 51. The extra seat was for Kim Bain-Moore, the first woman to compete in the event.

But the fishing is just a small part of the picture for the Bassmaster Classic. The biggest crowds were not at a lake-front but at the venues that held the weigh-ins and the expo. For the three-day event, there were 5,500 people at the boat launches, 24,600 at the weigh-ins that took place at the CenturyTel Center and 107,600 at the expo.

"Though we celebrate media and economic impact numbers, the Bassmaster Classic is also a community event that brings BASS, ESPN and the entire outdoor industry to the destination," said Michael Mulone, director of site selection and event marketing for BASS/ESPN Outdoors. "For us, we enjoy highlighting the destination to a worldwide audience through our media platforms."

Indeed, ESPN International aired the tournament to 10.1 million households in 106 countries. The rising viewership bodes well for future classics, such as next year's in Birmingham, Alabama.

RETURN TO BIRMINGHAM

The 2010 Bassmaster Classic, the 40th edition of the tournament, will also be the seventh in Birmingham. Fans will be able to see the anglers February 19 to 21 at Lay Lake and view the weigh-ins and tour the expo at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex.

"It's a great event, and it has a very positive impact for our community," said David Galbaugh, director of sports sales and marketing for the Greater Birmingham Convention & Visitors Bureau. According to Galbaugh, early estimates are for an economic impact of \$20 million and attendance over 60,000. Just as the big numbers in 2009 came at the expo for Shreveport-Bossier City, Birmingham is also planning for many people there.

Visitors to the expo will be able to interact with professional anglers, view the latest in outdoor gear from top retailers, hear about BASS membership and receive updates from the action on Lay Lake.

"It's a great expo, and it drums up support in our local community and also



Anglers prepare to take off for a day of competition in Lake Guntersville near Huntsville, Alabama, the site of a February stop on the 2009 Wal-Mart FLW Tour. The tour's events continue to grow more popular.

for outsiders coming in to visit our city," said Galbaugh. "It's fun for the whole family. We'll make this a family-friendly event so everyone can get involved and support the sport of fishing."

An important aspect to getting everybody involved, Galbaugh said, is Birmingham's central location, noting that the city is "easy to fly into, easy to drive into."

The classic already has a home for 2011. New Orleans will host that year for the fourth time.

FISHING THRIVES

Even during a downturn in the national economy, bass fishing is enjoying some of its most notable growth. But Charlie Evans, president and CEO of FLW Outdoors, says that when money is tight, it's time to start enjoying the simple pleasures.

"People recognize that the entire family can go out fishing and it won't break the bank. There's always a place close to you where you can take the whole family and be entertained," Evans said. "It's no secret that our country is in an economic slump. The economy is sluggish right now, but the great news is that fishing licenses are up."

Evans is a businessman who likes to get his hands dirty. Or wet, in his case. Living near Kentucky Lake, which he says has "the meanest bass in the country," he fishes every chance he gets. After taking part this past Fourth of July in an all-night Friday

tournament, he was back out on the lake Saturday and Sunday.

When he isn't dueling with those mean bass, he's doing deals and planning tournaments with the FLW work force. FLW's biggest tournament is the Forrest Wood Cup, and the most recent tournament was July 30 to August 2 in Pittsburgh. The next one is scheduled for the Atlanta area in August 2010.

The Forrest Wood Cup, with its \$1 million top prize and \$2 million total purse, is the biggest payout in bass fishing, and Pittsburgh planners had wanted to schedule the event for years. One of their biggest challenges was selling how the green-friendly sport of fishing could thrive in the Steel City.

"The old picture of a smoky, dirty Pittsburgh isn't the truth," said Jason Fulvi, executive director of convention sales for VisitPittsburgh. "Nowadays people get a chance to see the rivers and see how they've cleaned up from years ago. Visitors also get good exposure to southwestern Pennsylvania and its world-class entertainment."

Evans said he watched the 2005 Bassmaster Classic, which was held in Pittsburgh, on television and was impressed by the size and enthusiasm of the crowds. He was so impressed that he worked to have the FLW Cup held there just four years later.

On July 30, the Forrest Wood Cup got under way on the Three Rivers—the Allegheny, the Monongahela and the Ohio—with boats entering the water at the Southside Boat Ramp and



Scott Suggs won the Forrest Wood Cup in 2007 and became the event's first \$1 million winner.

the official launch taking place at Steelers Quay in front of Heinz Field.

Other parts of Pittsburgh got in on the fishing fun, too, as weigh-ins were

held at Mellon Arena and the David L. Lawrence Center housed the public show Fan Fest.

Television coverage was broadcast on Versus Country in the U.S. as part of the FLW Outdoors television program. FLW Outdoors is also broadcast in Canada on World Fishing Network and to more than 429 million households in Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Bass Federation's National Guard Junior World Championship, held in conjunction with the Forrest Wood Cup, took place in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, along the Allegheny River about an hour away from downtown Pittsburgh, as anglers aged 11 to 18 took to the water for a competition of their own. About 41 states were represented in the contest, with winners taking home scholarships and prizes.

PEACH STATE PUSH

In August 2010, the Forrest Wood Cup will set sail on Lake Lanier, just

outside Gainesville, Georgia, about an hour's drive north of Atlanta. "Lake Lanier is an excellent spot and has a reputation as one of the best bass fisheries in the world," said Lauren Curry, director of public and governmental affairs for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. "So we feel like they really want to be here, and we are of course happy to have them."

Curry's group is expecting an overall economic impact of about \$23 million with a direct spend figure of \$9 million. More than 60,000 visitors are expected over the duration of the cup.

Economic impact was the center of an initiative kicked off by Governor Sonny Perdue called Go Fish Georgia. Feeling that anglers were driving through Georgia to get to other fishing destinations, officials thought it was time to highlight the best spots in the state. Thus, an 18-site bass trail was laid out statewide, and all efforts were made to attract tournaments. Funds have been allocated for ramp installation, including the Laurel Park boat ramp at Lake Lanier in time for the Cup, and many other ramp sites are scheduled for completion during 2010. This will coincide with the publicity and expected boat traffic on the lakes that could be brought about by FLW's centerpiece tournament.

Curry said that the Go Fish initiative was established to transform Georgia into a national fishing destination by "improving the quality of fishing in Georgia waters, improving access to lakes and rivers for fishing in Georgia and increasing participation through promotion and marketing of Georgia's exceptional fishing resources."

With this renewed focus on fishing, Curry said it's an ideal time for Georgia to host the Forrest Wood Cup in 2010. "It's an amazing economic impact to the state. Plus the exposure is priceless," Curry said. "Georgia is the place for fishing, and we feel like we've brought in the big fish."

In addition to the fishing at Lake Lanier, the usual ancillary events will take place in Atlanta. The Georgia World Congress Center will house the Family Fun Zone, and the weigh-ins will take place at the Georgia Dome next door.

The National Guard Junior World Championships are also scheduled to take place in conjunction with the tour-

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Sports Spotlight

nement at a location to be determined. Forrest Wood Cup officials say they are excited that young people are taking to the sport and feel that it's a welcome sign for bass fishing's future.

FISHING THE NET

Although the act of fishing goes back thousands of years, it might be modern technology that is leading to a popularity boom. Two significant tech trends are increased access and fantasy fishing.

Fantasy sports are no longer limited to football, baseball and basketball; fantasy fishing has taken off online. Payouts can even match the prize for the winner of the big tournament in some cases. In Pittsburgh, the winner of the 2009 Forrest Wood Cup claimed a \$1 million prize. But so did the winner of FLW's season-long fantasy tournament, which included results from six qualifying tour events.

The sky is the limit when it comes to fantasy players wading through layers of data—who is better in more shallow waters, who is better deep, how weather affects anglers—and for the true stat gurus, this means they might make as much as the pros without even getting wet.

"Fantasy fishing has brought a lot of attention when you've got people becoming millionaires," said FLW's Evans. "For us, it's a great opportunity to get people to look into our sport. People can discover what tremendous athletes we have and how skillful they are. And they also find out that our anglers are willing to share their knowledge."

Professional fishing has used online technology in other ways, including video streaming, to reach the fans looking for their fishing fix. ESPN360.com was the online home for 2009 Bassmaster Classic coverage and drew in considerable viewership with more than 1 million minutes of video streamed. Also online, the Bassmaster Classic drew more than 12 million page views for a 64 percent increase over 2008.

Increased media attention has also produced more demand for media credentials. The 2009 Bassmaster Classic issued more than 320 credentials, more than double the early estimates of 150. With more reporters filing more stories, crowds of casual sports fans are getting the exposure to bass fishing that orga-

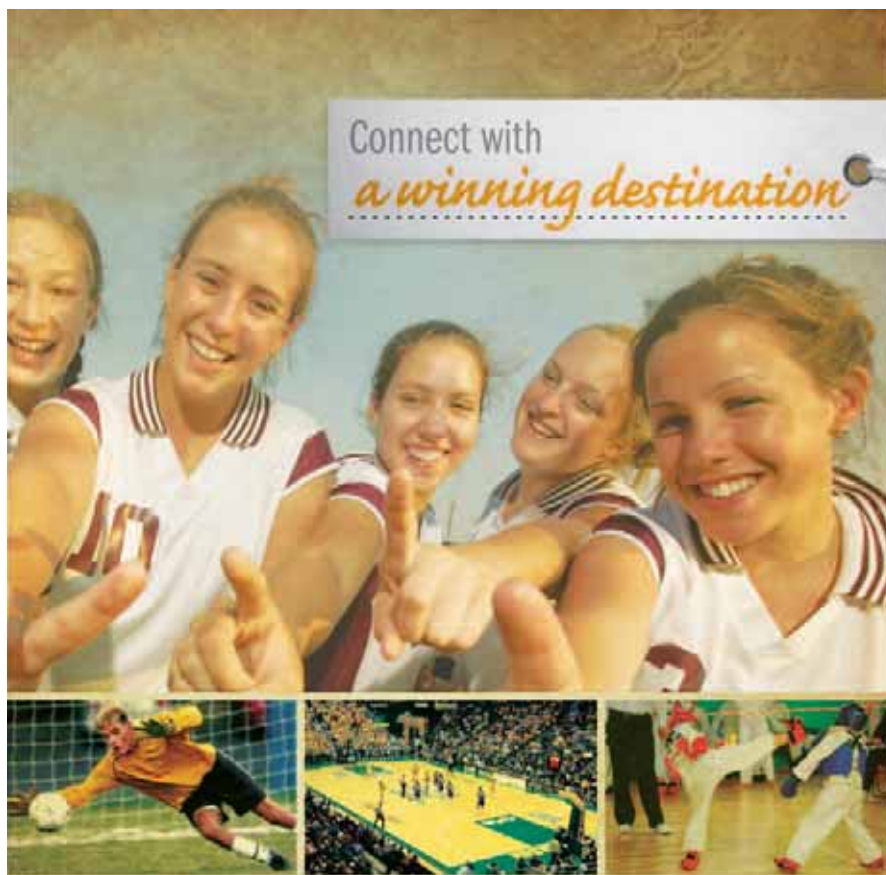
nizers consider invaluable. They expect this to bring about bigger numbers in nearly every facet of the sport: attendance at live tournaments and expos, TV ratings and webpage views.

CONTINUED GROWTH

Fishing has come a long way from its utilitarian beginnings. And with a rise in

tournaments, media coverage and prize money, bass fishing has quietly grown into a national, even global, sport.

Take the tradition of simple fishing and splash in some big-city venues, big-money stakes, enthusiastic college participants and high-tech trends, and anglers and sports fans are building a bright future for bass fishing. ■



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