



PHOTO BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

# Bass-Ack-Wards

*The world of collegiate tournament fishing* BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

In this year's *EW* Outdoors issue (see 5/5 "Get Hooked") I wrote an article on backwoods bass fishing that caught the attention of the UO bass team. Members of the team felt the *EW* article didn't "portray bass fishing in quite the way (they) approach the sport." Extending the proverbial olive branch, these collegiate fishermen invited me out to experience "a different side of bass fishing." I accepted. What follows is the account of a purist backwoods fisherman meeting the almost-pros of America's premier freshwater sport.

Cottage Grove Lake, 8 am: UO bass team anglers Ross Richards and Reed Frazier troll toward the dock in a flat-topped motor boat. The boat these guys have can zip across the water at 40 mph. Other boats they've fished in while competing in national tournaments can go up to 80 mph. This horsepower is needed because as a tournament fisherman the good spots on the lake fill fast, and it's first come first catch the minute the tourney starts. Speed counts.

The beginnings of fishing with the UO team resemble something out of a drag race. Frazier gasses up and

Richards hands me a life jacket. As we take off across the quiet and large body of water, the motor growls and I struggle to hang onto my bush hat. We are moving faster than anyone could ever dream of paddling, cutting across the lake in no time.

A vast gap exists between these award-winning collegiate sport fishermen and the average backwoods angler; encountering them in their element further solidified the differences. As they tie on at one of the spots they select, many other fishing rod/reel setups sit in the belly of the boat. Tournament fisherman like Reed and Frazier are each allowed to carry up to five different rod/reel setups onboard, and Richards says they always carry the limit. Different rod/reel setups amplify the type of tackle an angler chooses to use during a competition. A tournament fisherman might have one rod he uses when fishing with crank-bait, another when he is using a spinner.

Along with all these rods and reels, the heap of tackle these boys cart along with them is phenomenal. Backpacks stuffed full of tackle boxes (roughly six boxes per pack) are not uncommon. Frazier manipulates a small motor at the

bow using a foot pedal while at the same time retrieving his line. "You guys ever use nightcrawlers?" I ask.

"No, it's not a sport if you use live bait," Richards answers, "That's just tossing food in front of 'em." Tricking the fish through the use of synthetic bait and skillful angling is the real meat of the sport.

Speaking of meat, college tournament fishing isn't about sustenance at all. College and pro tournament anglers are judged by the amount of fish they catch in pounds.

Depending on the tournament, competitors are limited to a certain count (approximately six) of fish per team. Scoring is determined by the weight of each team's catch. Usually only largemouth, spotted or smallmouth bass are accepted.

If a team brings in more than the limit, they are disqualified. There is also usually a minimum length; most tournaments require that a bass be at least a foot long when measured with mouth closed.

Tournament fishermen are responsible for bringing the fish in to the weigh-in alive. This is accomplished by using a live-well, a tank inside the boat that pumps water in from the surrounding water, while also keeping itself aerated. All of this brings the notion of a college athlete and his/her equipment needs under reexamination.

Later in the day, Frazier hooks into a nice-sized largemouth shortly after I lose a big trout. We've been floating over the edge of a drop off, indicated via the onboard fish-finder. "That's one of the main things that separates pro from amateur, is knowing how to use the technology," says Richards.

"It's what I'm really working on right now with my game," Frazier adds as he shows me how to read the fish finder and delineate the longer dashes on the screen from the others. Frazier explains that the longer, choppy dashes are probably trout, moving quickly; the shorter dashes are lurking bass. The finder also relays the topography of the lake's bottom.

Watching that huge bass lifted into the air, watching Frazier smile and Richards nod in a way that implies it's nothing out of the ordinary to catch such a nice fish, I marvel at the world of collegiate tournament fishing inhabited by these young men. What a far cry from mud-soaked boots and a bloody fillet knife.

These guys approach fishing from a whole other angle, and rightfully so: They are competing in intercollegiate battles against others of their ilk. To them, my purist canoe-cruising, frog-rigging, fish-keeping ways likely seemed strange, archaic. Or maybe just flat out bass-ack-wards.

Returning to the dock, they lament that their sport doesn't hold more weight in this part of the country, whereas Tennessee's Bethel University offers scholarships for their bass-team anglers. About 220 colleges in the U.S. have competitive fishing teams.

I ask Richards and Frazier if they ever want to go pro. Both admit it is a dream. That shouldn't prove too unattainable, considering the two UO seniors have brought in about \$20,000 dollars worth of prize money between them. ■

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