

*Bassmaster Classic winner
Hank Cherry Jr. hoists the
trophy at the end of the
three-day tournament.*

BIG TIME

A GLIMPSE INSIDE THE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE
WORLD OF TOURNAMENT BASS FISHING

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It's a little after 2 p.m. on a crisp March afternoon in Scottsboro, Alabama, and Cody Hollen is chasing shadows as I look on. Day one of the 50th Bassmaster Classic, widely considered the Super Bowl of bass fishing, finds us 35 miles north of the starting line on Lake Guntersville. Hollen tells me this spot, an out-of-the-way creek with grassy cover, reminds him of a spot on his home waters of the Columbia River in Oregon.

I listen and nod because that's about all I can do. As a tournament marshal, I've signed a waiver that limits my involvement to documenting each catch using the BASSTrakk app on my phone, which is uploaded to a leader board that tracks the entire field of anglers in real time. Hollen is one of 53 professionals competing in this year's Classic. None of them has ever won the tournament.

With each cast, Hollen hopes to land one of the vaunted largemouth that inhabit Lake Guntersville's tannic depths. Hooking up with the right fish can come with a fair share of endorsements, purse money and fame, but time is not on Hollen's side. He presses his foot on the pedal of the bow-mounted trolling motor to spin the boat around while studying the fishfinder at his feet. Affixed to a nearby boathouse, a tattered American flag wafts on the breeze. An expert flick of the wrist sends a red crankbait in its direction.

No dice. Hollen, who is 36 and has been fishing professionally for a year, reels in the lure and slaps it on the water to remove some grass, as he's done many times today. But now there's something else in that motion: Exasperation is setting in. He unclaps the rod holder on the bass boat's carpeted deck and swaps his rod for another setup. He doesn't speak. The Bass Anglers Sportsman Society has provided lunch in a plastic bag, but Hollen doesn't touch it. Perhaps he's thinking about the nice fish that got away earlier this morning. "I needed that thing, and that was a good one, too," he says out loud, to himself, with evident frustration. "You cannot be fricken' doing that!"

The shadows are growing longer, and the 4-pound largemouth in the live well won't make much of an impression in the standings at weigh-in. Throughout the day, only one person comes by to check on Hollen's progress. ESPN's flotilla of camera boats never materializes.

We need to be back at the ramp by 3:20 p.m. — sharp. Punctuality isn't just recommended; it's dictated by B.A.S.S. tournament regulations. For every minute anglers are late, they are docked a pound from their total weight. (A dead fish incurs a 4-ounce penalty.) The catch limit is five fish per day, and scoring is determined by the total weight of the fish. Upon reaching the check-in at the ramp, each angler drives to the weigh-in at Legacy Arena in the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex with their catch in the boat's aerated live wells, where they will walk onstage with their fish in front of thousands of fans. Our drive from Guntersville to Birmingham is about two hours, plenty of time for Hollen to ruminate on what went right — and even longer, I imagine, to stew about what did not.

Hollen pulls a beanie over his trucker hat and adjusts his pink Oakley goggles. As one of three B.A.S.S. Nation top finishers, he's taken the long road to get here: a rigorous series of local and regional tournaments culminating in a separate championship. Now competing in the Elite Series, Hollen has won \$10,000 — a small sum given the costs associated with professional bass fishing.



Anglers prepare for a long day of competitive fishing at the Bassmaster Classic.



Speed has always been a part of the game, with anglers racing to spots and eventually flying back to the ramp to avoid a late penalty.

He starts the 250-hp outboard and throttles up, quickly bringing us to 60 mph as waterfowl take flight. Hollen has the steering wheel in one hand and holds his Lowrance chart plotter in place with the other. (It wasn't installed properly.) Earlier, something his girlfriend gave him had blown out of the boat. He doesn't tell me what it was, just that it's missing. To make matters worse, a plastic water-pressure tube has broken, and water is spraying his midsection and soaking his green Nike Air Max shoes. We pass a stand of trees uprooted by a tornado.

We reach the ramp with time to spare. A contingent of pros has congregated, each waiting for a family member or friend to back a decal-covered pickup and trailer into the bourbon-colored water. The 20-mph winds have kicked up the lake into a mess that reminds Hollen of the Columbia River.

Taylor Smith, from Spokane Valley, Washington, is in the boat next to us. "How'd you do?" Hollen asks. Smith says he landed four small bass. The saying "you can't win the Classic on the first day, but you can certainly lose it" holds true. In 24 hours, Hollen and Smith will be eliminated.

NASCAR, not the Super Bowl

The Bassmaster Classic is one of the biggest stages in fishing, and its tagline, "Big Bass. Big Stage. Big Dreams." — plastered just about everywhere — is a constant reminder. It's also big business. Founded in 1968 by Ray Scott,

an insurance salesman from Alabama, B.A.S.S. has propelled bass fishing from a pastime into a multibillion-dollar industry. Scott envisioned anglers competing in televised, tournament-style formats akin to professional golf or bowling. Today, with GoPros and smartphones documenting every cast, that dream seems quaint. B.A.S.S. has more than 4 million die-hard fans around the world, and pros concede a level of approachability that is unheard of in most professional sports. And it has spawned its imitators, such as Major League Fishing, which airs on the Discovery Channel and is owned by Kroenke Sports & Entertainment.

The Classic is often compared to the Super Bowl, but football isn't the best analogy. Professional bass fishing is more a combination of NASCAR (fast boats, lots of sponsors, fervent fans), professional golf (with its focus on individual performance and unflinching nerves), and professional wrestling (for showmanship and pageantry). The successful pros exude a preternatural authenticity, but peel back the veneer, even slightly, and that good-naturedness can sometimes feel manufactured. It's a survival tactic. Raw talent for consistently catching fish is only one of the ingredients necessary for continued success. Anglers also have to be able to address the crowd.

Now in his 28th year as a full-time pro, Mark Menendez calls the sport "astronomically challenging" for the demands it places on young and old alike. "I had no clue as a freshman in

college my first semester that the most important class I would take was going to be public speaking," Menendez says. "I use those skills every single day."

During weigh-ins onstage, pros *aw-shucks* their way through rehearsed speeches that touch on the day's performance, ultimately attributing their good fortune to God and family, while assiduously name-checking their tackle and other equipment to satisfy the myriad sponsors that adorn their clothing and boats.

As for the physical component of competitive fishing, nine-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier Brandon Palaniuk says it's "like driving a go-kart race and pitching a Major League Baseball game at the same time." The 32-year-old Palaniuk, whose nickname is "The Prodigy," engages with 186,000 followers on Instagram. He employs a personal videographer to document his every move, creating videos that sometimes play up a comedic effect. But his business acumen is no joke. Palaniuk could also be called "The Entrepreneur," as his marketing efforts have netted him \$11,000 in T-shirt sales alone — adding another revenue stream to his nearly \$1.2 million career earnings and endorsement deals. He tells me his ultimate goal is to have Nike as a major sponsor.

Palaniuk and Trait Zaldain represent the new guard making headway in the sport — young men and women who can't remember a time before fluorocarbon and braided line, aerated live wells, digital sonar, graphite rods, high-performance bass boats and foot-operated trolling motors guided by GPS. While Palaniuk's fishing career is well-established, Zaldain, with her fuchsia truck wrap, is among a growing number of female anglers coming up through the Open Series (a feeder league) with aspirations of fishing the Classic. "I want girls to know you can wear pink, and you can still be a badass," Zaldain says. "Wearing pink doesn't make you a Barbie." Her followers seek to supplant the image of the bikini-clad fishing model with that of the real deal — women who aren't afraid to go toe-to-toe with men like her husband, bass pro Chris Zaldain.

But the sport can be exacting. Trait has had three shoulder surgeries in the last 18 months. Depending on the technique, tournament anglers might make 500 to 1,000 casts a day. Coming from Idaho, Palaniuk used to drive his Toyota Tundra 40,000 miles a year to tournaments held primarily in the central and eastern United States. (He says he's scaled back in recent years to "just 30,000 miles.") When he was younger, to save money, his road diet consisted mainly of ramen noodles and fast food. Instead of booking hotel rooms, he'd save money by sleeping in the bed of his pickup under a cap, which he jokingly refers to as "Tundra Suites." Inside his truck



Tight to a nice fish, Todd Auten placed second at the Classic.

today are just a few byproducts of his success: Daiwa reels, Simms jackets, multiple rods and a black leather-bound Bible.

Menendez refers to the long-lasting relationships pros make with their sponsors as "security." Of course, not everybody "makes it." Menendez has seen pros come and go — sometimes as many as three or four times throughout a career. "They go back and get whatever job is available to them, at car dealerships, construction companies or lawn services," he says. "And then all of a sudden they break through." All it takes is one strong showing to set a career in motion. "A completely new angler comes out when you've got the desire, the economic confidence, and if you're catching, it all lines up," Menendez adds. "Then you're a dangerous animal."

Back on the Road

It's 6:45 a.m. on the second day of the Classic, and Chris Zaldain and I are ready to blast off

on Lake Guntersville. We're not alone. Aside from the competitors, a large group of fans — many decked out in head-to-toe camo — has gathered at Civitan Park. The wind has died down slightly. Driving to the lake in the predawn hours, the waxing gibbous moon, yellow and unblinking, hangs like a cat's eye above the clouds.

The weather in northern Alabama during this time of year is notoriously unpredictable, and many of the pros have adjusted their strategies. On the dock, I overhear one of the older anglers responding to a question about the conditions. "I'm trying to find the switch to turn off the big fan on the lake," he says. "I can't find it."

Announcers refer to Chris Zaldain as the "Zaldain-gerous One," and he's a favorite to win the Classic. Or at least he was. With five fish weighing a total of 10 pounds, 8 ounces at the end of day one, he's trailing the leaders by a sub-

stantial 19 pounds. Zaldain, who is 35 and has been tournament fishing for nine years, adjusts the GoPro camera on the bow. If he's worried, he doesn't show it. Last year, after a rough start on the Tennessee River, he bagged a big largemouth that rocketed him to third place.

I notice that one of the marshals is wearing a helmet. Driving fast is part of the sport, and pro fishermen have infamously ended up in the drink or, worse, up in the trees from too much throttle. Zaldain points to a difficult-to-reach handle beneath my seat; he refers to it as the "oh shit" handle. "Hold it like you're riding a bull," he advises. But we don't go far. As the rest of the pack heads north, we duck under the first bridge. Zaldain's strategy is to fish a swimbait over rocky structure. "That's where they bite the swimbaits the best," he says. This spot also places him in a limelight of sorts. From the road, tractor-trailers honk in encouragement as curious fans ask how he's doing.



The Classic doesn't keep the weekend warriors away. By the third overpass, Zaldain is competing for casting space with amateur anglers who are fishing for fun. For the most part, they give him a wide berth. "We're just here to have a good time. You're trying to make a living," acknowledges one. But not everyone exhibits that southern hospitality. An older gentleman fishing from a nearby jonboat suggests Zaldain stop going back and forth ahead of his boat. Later, a fisherman using live bait hooks a bass that Zaldain estimates weighs about 6 pounds. The line breaks, and the fish is lost. "That the one you need?" asks the man, mockingly. "Yeah, that's the one all right," Zaldain says. It's as if a spectator were trying to tee off next to Tiger Woods during the Masters. "This makes me want to quit fishing," says Zaldain, who might only be half kidding. After catching five decent fish, he pulls up the trolling motor, stows his rods and other gear, and we head back to the ramp. At this point, I'm rooting for Zaldain; impartiality be damned. He's likeable.



Lee Livesay fires off one more cast. (Left) The Classic draws spectators of all stripes.



Livesay releases a fish during practice day, when the anglers plan their strategies for the tournament.



Scott Canterbury fishes the St. Johns Elite Series in Florida on the tournament trail to the Classic.



A 14th-place Classic finish netted Keith Combs a \$15,000 payout.

Unfortunately, he never found the right bunch of fish on the final day and wound up 16th overall, with a \$13,000 payout. Hollen placed third to last but still earned a \$10,000 check. He'll get back in his truck, which is adorned with the names of family and friends — the result of a grassroots campaign to raise money for gas and gear — and drive to the next Elite Series tournament. For Hollen, the road ahead is long, and just beginning for the relatively new tournament angler. After three days of fishing, Hank Cherry Jr., a 46-year-old from North Carolina who led from day one, steps onto the stage to accept the trophy and \$300,000. "The 50th Bassmaster Classic finishes with a Cherry on top," says the emcee. "For the rest of your life, Hank Cherry, you are a Bassmaster Classic champion." Cherry says winning the Classic will bring additional sponsorship opportunities. And it will enable him to spend more time with his family. For a man who's on the road 200 days a year, that's a reward that seems most important. Cherry didn't have to run far to catch a 9-pounder on practice day, but a problem with his trolling motor forced him to change his strategy. After running back to the service yard, Cherry wanted to fish closer to the start and make sure everything was working properly. After five casts by a nearby causeway on Browns Creek, he hooked a 5-pounder. He spotted shad in the water, and there were no other anglers around. The motor trouble proved serendipitous: Cherry wound up fishing that spot, which wasn't his original intent, and a grassy flat for most of the three-day event. On the first day, Cherry fished a bladed jig and landed five fish for a 29-pound, 3-ounce bag — the highest single-day total of his career. That included a pair of bass that went 7 pounds, 2 ounces each. On the second and third days, he alternated between a jerkbait and his own signature series Picasso Dock Rocket. Cherry changed to medium-shank treble hooks on the jerkbait to make it heavier, so when he paused his retrieve, the lure would drop faster. Nearly all of his fish on those days came as the bait was falling. "When I got those first bites and saw how good they were getting the bait, I stuck with it," he says. Cherry wound up with a three-day total of 65 pounds, 5 ounces, besting second-place finisher Todd Auten by 6 pounds, 11 ounces. Cherry kisses the trophy — etched with the names of the 49 previous winners — and holds it aloft as confetti falls around him. He is nearly speechless as he embraces his two kids and his wife, who have joined him on the stage. "There was a time not long ago where I didn't even know if I was going to fish again," he says. He chokes up. It seems sincere. Then he thanks his sponsors. 🐟