

Tuned In

CHESAPEAKE BAY ANGLER SHAWN KIMBRO CAN 'SEE'
BENEATH THE SURFACE LIKE FEW OTHERS BY LISTENING
TO WHAT THE VIBRATIONS IN HIS LINE ARE TELLING HIM

*First light finds Shawn Kimbro (right)
fast to a Chesapeake Bay striped bass.*



Shawn Kimbro hefts a nice early-season striper (left); father Jason Kimbro was both an angling man and a man of the cloth (above); young Shawn with a big Tennessee bucketmouth.

Think down the line. That's the bit of wisdom Jason Kimbro taught his sons as they chased largemouth bass and landlocked stripers as kids in the 1960s on Cherokee Lake in East Tennessee. Fishing was a central thread that ran through this hard-working, hard-fishing family.

In those early years, the Kimbro clan cranked and trolled big wooden 600 Bomber swimmers deep in that Tennessee Valley Authority reservoir. (They bought them by the case.) The sons learned a great deal fishing those deep-divers, such as how the plug's metal lip could transmit information up the line through changes in the way it swam. "The Bomber first got me tuned in to that swimming pattern, feeling for any alteration in its rhythm that could teach me what it was touching, including fish," Shawn Kimbro recalls of those days on the water with his dad.

The early indoctrination paid off, and today Kimbro is something of a trailblazer. He regularly catches 40-plus-inch Chesapeake Bay stripers on baitcasting outfits, even in January. And the advice to think down the line has become part of a profound body of angling knowledge, especially concerning stripers, which Kimbro freely shares through seminars,

videos, a blog and his two books. In addition to playing a mean guitar, this Tennessee mountain boy is regarded as one of the sharpest fishermen on the Chesapeake.

Pattern Recognition

Kimbro's strong fish sense is grounded not only in curiosity and time on the water, but also in the elements of rigorous medical research. He's the director of a sleep lab at a major university, and his name is on 31 peer-reviewed and published papers.

So when Kimbro, a former Army Intelligence sergeant, talks about thinking down the line, he could just as easily be referring to brain waves and heartbeats as to sonar logs and GPS tracks. Whether at work in the lab or bouncing a jig over some tempting piece of Bay bottom, Kimbro is adept at analyzing frequency and amplitude. He has a real knack for recognizing patterns amid endless streams of information and noise.

He is one of those anglers who really has the feel, the touch. He knows what his lure is doing at all times. And he can see the bottom in his mind's eye as clearly as if he were staring at a sonar screen — maybe more so. As proficient as he with his electronics, the tech-savvy Kimbro gets much of the information he needs right through the line and rod tip.

“My father taught us to think down the line and ‘see’ what’s on the bottom by detecting even the smallest ticks and taps,” says Kimbro, who is 55. “The first step is just recognizing the makeup of the bottom by the different ways the lure plops onto mud, sand or rocks.” Over time, he says, you begin to recognize that whenever your lure contacts something different — be it a stump, a log or even a shell — it changes the frequency that’s transmitted up the line and through your rod.

“It eventually becomes something of a sixth sense,” Kimbro says. “You’re so tuned in to the expected amplitudes and frequencies of the lure as it contacts the bottom that even the slightest change is registered.”

In that regard, Kimbro adds, “A strike is very similar to an off note in a song, an out-of-tune banjo string or an epileptic spike in an EEG recording because it’s a vibration that doesn’t fit the expected sequence.”

Pastor With a Pole

The son remembers his father fondly. Jason Kimbro was an energetic and industrious family provider who also fished like the devil and believed deeply in the Christian gospel he preached as the pastor of several rural Church of Christ parishes. He sold life insurance, farmed a bit and worked in manufacturing plants. In the early 1970s, he leased a marina on sprawling Cherokee Lake, which held robust stocks of largemouth bass, landlocked stripers, white bass, crappies, catfish and shellcrackers (referred to as redear sunfish). The family lived on a houseboat, and the lake was about as close to fishing heaven as the sons of a preacher were likely to find.

“He showed us that everything matters, including knots, line, reels, even how you stand and where you put your hands on the rod,” Kimbro recalls. “He could tune in at very high speed after years of ripcranking those big wooden Bombers.”

The elder Kimbro could catch, too; the family photo album offers ample proof. “Dad especially loved shellcrackers,” Kimbro remembers with a smile, “even though he was mighty good with largemouth and rockfish. He caught a 14-pound bass in 1962 visiting my mother’s family in Georgia, and it won the Field & Stream contest for that year. But he loved shellcrackers, both to catch and to eat.”

See the Bottom

Jason Kimbro — as well as Shawn and his brother Creig, who is now a Tennessee state fishery biologist — got to know the underwater topography and current patterns of Cherokee Lake during TVA water-level drawdowns. The family’s Lowrance “Little Green Box” flashing depth sounder helped provide a 3-D sense.

And fishing, of course, added to that overview. Shawn’s father loved to crawl a Texas-rigged soft plastic worm over Cherokee Lake’s bottom. It helped him develop a feel for where there was rock, gravel, sand or mud, as well as dead trees and even roads and fences from the time before the dam flooded that part of the Holston River.

“The Texas-rigged worm taught us to ‘see the bottom’ and the lure in relation to everything around it,” Kimbro says. “When you’re really tuned in to a lure, you can feel an aura around it — you feel the displacement of water before the strike.”

Kimbro and his brother would stretch a dollar by collecting lost lures along the lakeshore when water levels were low, and they’d tinker with



them to make them more effective. He also learned to pour, paint and fish lead jigs, which further schooled him about the lake’s bottom.

Today, rhythm runs through Kimbro’s life. Singing was a big part of the church services his father led, and away from church, Kimbro was immersed in Appalachian music culture. He learned to play several acoustic instruments and wrote songs about the people, land and waters, songs that expressed what he came to call “mountain soul.”

“The way a Bomber swims and a mandolin’s strings vibrate,” Kimbro says, “they’re both all about patterns of frequency and amplitude.”

Down the Line

Kimbro put his knowledge of Cherokee Lake and the Holston River to use in high school and college by fishing blue and channel catfish commercially with trotlines. (And yes, he wrote a song about them.) Then came a 10-year hitch in Army Intelligence, where he learned to think down a different kind of line: Morse code from unfriendly sources. The challenge was still about discerning patterns and anomalies in frequency and amplitude. “Get used to them well enough and you recognize when something gets out of the normal pattern,” Kimbro says. “Sometimes I could even sense the quality of the equipment sending the signals, which helped identify the source.”

His last several years in the Army took him back to Knoxville, Ten-

nessee, where he formed a band named Mountain Soul. He played local venues, recorded a CD and started fishing again. His defense work led him to the technology and practice of lie detection, which relies on the analysis of brain waves, heart rhythms and other physiological processes. Again, frequency and amplitude.

He quickly saw the connections between lie detection and biophysical sleep analysis. “It’s still thinking down the line,” he says, “integrating multiple sources of information, all expressed in graphs of frequency and amplitude, looking for patterns and anomalies.”

Sleep analysis offered Kimbro significant work opportunities as a medical technologist at hospital-related sleep therapy centers. He also kept fishing and playing music, at this point with his sons — Daniel, Cory and Jacob.

When Kimbro’s wife, lawyer Dianne Miller, took a job in Washington, D.C., in 2004, he left Mountain Soul and found work that developed into a faculty-level position directing the sleep lab at George Washington University. (His sons continue with the band today.) For the past 10 years, Shawn and Dianne have lived in a sprawling old white-frame house in Stevensville, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake, just across from Annapolis via the Bay Bridge, which he calls his “light-tackle university.”

The couple commute to Washington daily, but Kimbro has become



Shawn Kimbro is an expert at listening to what his lures tell him as they move over the bottom, tapping sand, rocks or shells. He pours his own jigs and likes “hot-rodding” them in bright, contrasting colors.



Shawn Kimbro holds a photo memory of a big Chesapeake rockfish outside the shop behind his house. He has successfully incorporated some of the angling tradecraft he learned as a boy in Tennessee to the Bay's tidewaters, where he has perfected a technique known as "cracking the whip."

adept at carving early-morning and late-evening fishing trips with his regular boat partners, a retired high school baseball coach and a gourmet meat cutter.

Art of Jigging

There's an art to trolling on the Chesapeake, especially bouncing jigs on hard-bottom reefs. But the prevalent inline trolling systems — often with multiple lines strung from planer boards — left Kimbro cold. It's a productive technique, but he preferred the hands-on light-tackle fishing he'd learned on Cherokee Lake.

In the late 1990s, a handful of Upper Chesapeake anglers had developed a technique they called light-tackle jigging, which combined expertise at reading sonar with fishing jigs tipped with soft plastic tails, usually on spinning tackle. This method correlated nicely with some of the TVA black bass and striper techniques Kimbro learned as an adolescent. When he started fishing the Chesapeake, he wasted no time refining the method, tailoring his experience to these new waters.

And it worked, of course, stripers being stripers, wherever they live. He learned to use visual ranges, upon which the best light-tackle-jigging anglers on the Bay rely. And he figured out the areas where fish respond well to vertical presentations, and other spots where they react more strongly to diagonal or horizontal, bottom-hugging retrieves.

Kimbro picked up on these nuances and added his own from Cherokee Lake. He uses baitcasting tackle to adjust depth quickly and sense subtle strikes, lure behavior and bottom features. He also added his father's love of "hot-rodding" lures, which means combining contrasting colors and scents. (For example, "That big Georgia large-mouth ate a purple worm hot-rodded with a fluorescent red tail.") He pours his own jig heads and paints them with bright color accents, often in his favorite "candy corn" pattern.

Early on, he discovered that he could goad stripers or rockfish to strike by "cracking the whip." It's a technique in which he raises his rod tip in a short, quick motion when the jig first touches the bottom

so the head and soft plastic tail hit the bottom in sequence, causing puffs of sediment. It's eerie to fish beside the 6-foot, 2-inch Kimbro when he is using this technique. The sound of the rod whipping through the air is unique, and his mind is in another place, oblivious to everything except what the frequency and amplitude of the line vibrations are telling him.

When he is dialed in, he can feel both the jig head and the tail touch down. The rod is typically a light, strong, high-modulus graphite baitcasting model around 6½ feet, medium-heavy with extra-fast action. He spools the low-profile reels he favors with 10-pound braid, supplemented by an 18- to 24-inch fluorocarbon leader for abrasion resistance. The mountain boy has adjusted well to the flatlands and tidal waters.

Whir of Seasons

After five years fishing the Bay from a 26-foot I/O express cruiser, Kimbro knew what he wanted in a year-round fish boat. He turned to Bill Judge of Judge Yachts in Denton, Maryland, for a 27-foot center console with a T-top, powered by a 225-hp Honda on an Armstrong bracket. *Thunder Road* has been a busy girl ever since, fishing all over the Chesapeake.

While jigs are Kimbro's mainstay for most of the year, in warm weather he swaps the stiff baitcaster for a softer spinning rig with monofilament to fish poppers and walk-the-dog spoons. And stripers aren't his only quarry. In late February and early March, he wades and bank-fishes sweetwater tidal creeks for yellow perch. Late March finds him fishing warm-water power plant discharges for big rockfish that are beginning to move toward the Chesapeake's spawning rivers. This is when the anglers aboard *Thunder Road* tangle with the biggest fish of the year, some breaking 50 pounds but still handled on the light baitcasters — and released with care. Meanwhile, the Potomac River near Kimbro's sleep lab offers strong runs of hickory and American shad.

Late spring may find him near the mouth of the Chesapeake or in the North Carolina sounds, casting to bull red drum. September usually means at least one trip for speckled trout in Tangier Sound. When he and Dianne vacation, their trips usually involve water. Kimbro just loves to fish.

The family enjoys fresh fish but is selective about what winds up on the dinner table, with an eye toward sustaining the resources that feed them. Kimbro serves on the board of the Coastal Conservation Association and supports the oyster-restoration programs of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. He has worked on Careful Catch, a joint CCA/CBF initiative that teaches anglers the proper way to release fish.

Kimbro also loves to share his knowledge and learn from other anglers. His first book, *Chesapeake Light Tackle*, published in 2012, details his approaches to Chesapeake rockfish, including thinking down the line and cracking the whip. His second book, *The Right Stuff* (2015), deals more with attitudes, approaches and building networks of fishing information. (Both books are available at chesapeakelighttackle.com, as well as on Kimbro's Facebook page and his YouTube channel, where many of his takes are backed up with music by Mountain Soul.)

You'll also note an absence of detail in discussions of where to fish. The emphasis is on discovering the mysteries of the water on your own, which is where he draws his greatest satisfaction. After all, that's what thinking down the line is all about. 🐟

