



# Building the

## Collegiate bass fishing gets high marks from electronics makers

*The popularity of bass fishing competitions among college teams is not lost on many manufacturers of marine equipment, including electronics. Sponsors often provide participants with financial support, product prizes and technical advice.*

I watched in amazement as 25-year-old tournament bass angler Daylon Smith swung the bow of his boat toward a distant shoreline point. His right foot never left the trolling motor pedal and his eyes never wavered from his Garmin MFD screen, as he turned his head just enough to address me in a loud whisper. "Get up here, there are some fish holding off this point." I watched as he made a cast, then pointed to his lure on the Garmin Livescope display, slowly sinking toward a pair of lethargic winter bass on the Garmin's Livescope display. Cold water made the fish sluggish that day, and you had to get a lure right in their face if you wanted to have any chance of a bite.

It was like watching a video game as the lure snaked its way towards the bottom, the fish slowly rising and the two coming together on the LCD screen at the moment Daylon wheeled back on his rod to drive the hook home. It was—pardon the pun—an electrifying experience for an old-school angler like me.

I first met Daylon a few months earlier during the 2022 WON U.S. Open at Lake Mojave in Nevada. I'd put out some feelers during this big-money, 200-boat event that I was looking for an expert to help film some action video of the latest Livescope technology. "You need to hook up with this kid Daylon," I was told by older, more seasoned bass pros. I soon learned that Daylon was a young buck who recently graduated from New Mexico State University with a degree in business management and a boatload of experience as president of the school's bass fishing team.

College fishing is one of the hottest things going right now, and smart manufacturers are finding new ways to partner with collegiate fishing tournaments nationwide, as well as individual anglers who represent the "rising stars" of competitive bass fishing.

As expected, forward-thinking boat builders, engine companies, rod and reel makers, lure designers and accessory manufacturers are becoming increasingly involved in this popular competitive sport. It should also come as no surprise that several key marine electronics brands are stepping up to support collegiate fishing and get a crack at influencing a new generation of tech-savvy fishermen.

### Angling for prizes

College bass fishing tournament trails, as they're called, can be found across the nation, ranging from

relatively small, grass roots programs to highly structured and promoted series drawing big-money sponsorships and participation from major colleges and universities. The three primary college bass fishing programs are the Bass Pro Shops Collegiate Bass Fishing Series, managed by the Association for Collegiate Anglers (ACA); the Abu Garcia College Fishing Series under the umbrella of Major League Fishing (MLF); and the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) Strike King Bassmaster College Series by Bass Pro Shops. The tournaments take place in long list of lakes and some rivers from coast to coast.

According to ACA Tournament Director Kyle Curry, this year is the contest's 18th season, with a 2023 schedule of three to four regular season events followed by a championship round, the BOAT/US Collegiate Bass Fishing Championship presented by Bass Pro Shops. College teams on this trail range in size from two or four anglers up to more than 60. ACA recognizes schools for their performances throughout the year, with between 300 and 400 colleges taking part in a typical season. "Our teams range from small, self-funded and self-run groups to Division 1 universities with coaches and athletic department funding. We have community colleges and major universities competing against one another, and thanks to the nature of fishing, everybody has an equal chance," said Curry.

The MLF college fishing program features nine events around the country, culminating in the Abu Garcia College Fishing National Championship presented by Yeti and Lowrance. The winning club receives a Phoenix boat/Mercury motor and cash prize worth \$43,500, with other valuable packages for second and third place finishers, as well. The winning team also

advances to the 2023 MLF Toyota Series Championship to compete as pros with a shot at winning as much as \$235,000. The highest finishing team member at the Toyota Series

# Brand

Championship advances to MLF's Redcrest 2024 to compete against the world's top bass pros for \$300,000.

## Eye on the Bassmaster Classic

The Bassmaster College Series gives student anglers a platform to compete with their peers across the nation. Fishermen can compete in five regional tournaments and a Wild Card tournament for the opportunity to advance to the College National Championship. From there, one college angler will earn a berth in the Bassmaster Classic, often considered the "Super Bowl" of professional bass fishing.

In addition to a wide range of prizes, cash awards, sponsor-driven contingency programs and other incentives, student anglers compete for something that may be even more important — school pride. School of the Year competitions are common focal points among college trails, as teams strive to pile up enough points throughout the season to propel their schools to the top of the mountain. School spirit and team bragging rights are just as important to these fishing athletes as prizes and individual awards.

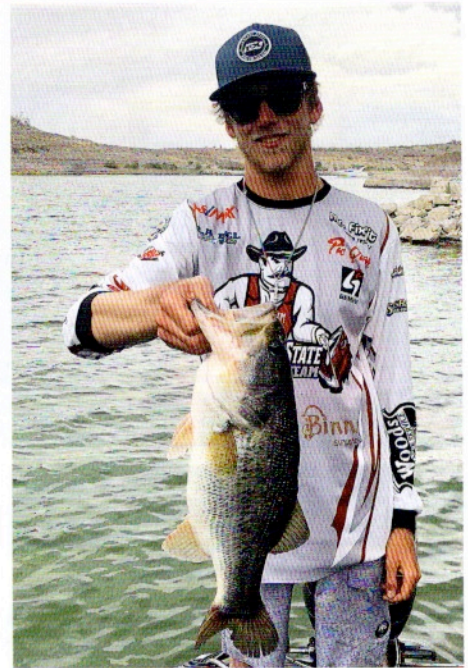
The thrill of competitive team angling isn't limited to college-aged men and women. Both MLF and Bassmaster support vigorous high school tournament series as well, giving younger anglers an opportunity to test their fishing chops against the best in the country.

In addition to the three major competitions, there's a variety of smaller college fishing circuits serving different regions of the country. While the schools and the tournaments themselves might be smaller, and the prizes and sponsor incentives more modest, these events deliver an important opportunity for student athletes to compete and learn what it's like to be a professional angler.

## Business 101

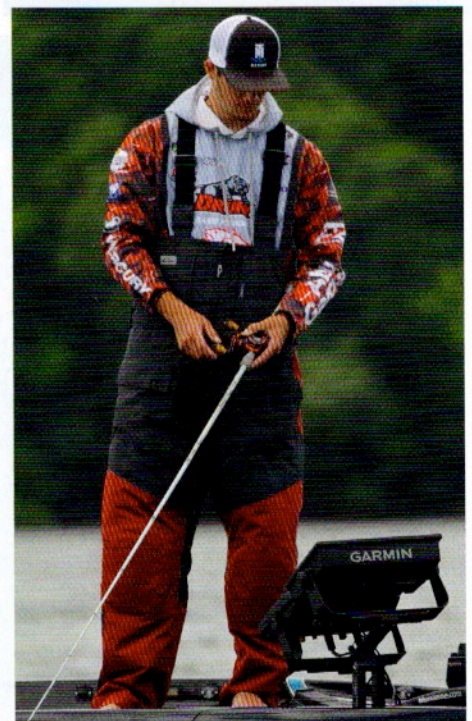
The "hook-up" between college fishing and boating electronics brands like Garmin, Navico, Humminbird and others makes perfect business sense. First there's the universal appeal of bass fishing. Populations of bass can be found in every US state except Alaska, making it the most widely accessible recreational fishery in the country.

Even modest bass boats today are packed with electronics and technology. From bow-mounted, satellite-guided trolling motors with virtual anchoring capabilities to the spider-like



As an undergraduate at New Mexico State University, Daylon Smith (above) was president of the school's bass fishing team. He says that team competitions not only help grow a new generation of future anglers—they also teach important life skills.

Certainly not all college anglers become full-time fishing pros, although that is the goal of many on the collegiate circuit. Even if they don't enter the pro ranks, says Garmin's Dave Dunn, "They are likely to be avid fishermen for the rest of their lives, and this makes them great customers and brand ambassadors."





Team members rarely go home without an impressive haul of swag given away by manufacturers. For winners there are also prizes of high-end electronics and trophies in addition to cash.





shallow-water pole anchors bolted to the transom, today's bass boats literally bristle with electronic tech. It's not unusual for a typical 20-foot bass boat to have a 15-inch MFD display mounted at the helm, with one or even two more large displays bracket-mounted up in the bow, where most of the actual fishing takes place. Screens glow with high-definition lake cartography, straight down echosounding, side- and forward-scanning sonar and live, "ultrasound-like" depictions of fish swimming around the boat.

### Reaching the next-gen

Throw in the fact that today's youth is more tech-savvy than any previous generation, and it's easy to see why competitive bass fishing is so appealing to college students seeking a sense of camaraderie. It's also evident why up-and-coming student anglers are so attractive to marine electronics marketers.

"We want to start 'em young," says Dave Dunn, Senior Director of Marine and RV Sales for Garmin USA. "We're a relatively new player in the bass fishing world, compared to brands like Lowrance and Humminbird. "Products like our Force trolling motor and Livescope sonar technology are helping to change this. These have been real game changers for Garmin. However, it's still very important that we reach the next generation of bass anglers early and begin building brand loyalty at a young age."

To help achieve this, Garmin is an official sponsor of the ACA tournament trail, providing financial support, product prizes and a contingency program that awards up to \$500 for anglers who are the highest placing Garmin users at qualifying Garmin-sanctioned events.

Garmin also supports ACA by offering product discounts to qualifying students, and occasionally providing free products to an especially promising angler — or one with an interesting back story. Dunn points out that recent NCAA "NIL" rule changes (allowing college athletes to profit from their Name, Image, and Likeness) apply to the game of fishing, as well, and have opened the door to monetary and product awards for college anglers.

Garmin definitely takes a forward-looking approach to supporting the stars of the future. For example, Garmin sponsors 11-year-old Carter Pjesky, a youngster with a growing social media following and impressive angling accomplishments. As if more proof was needed that this strategy works, Dunn points out that nine out of the 10 top finishers in the 2022 Bassmaster Classic were running Garmin on their boats.

The Lowrance brand is already iconic among bass fishermen, aided by evolving new technologies, such as the HDSLIVE MFD family, Active Target Sonar and Ghost trolling motors. Even so, parent company Navico still sees the wisdom of emphasizing college bass fishing. Lowrance supports the MLF College Series as a season-long sponsor and is a title sponsor of the MLF College National Championship. Through its college contingency program, Lowrance will award \$500 if an angler on the winning team at the MLF College National Championship is using a Lowrance HDSLIVE, Elite FS or Hook Reveal during the tournament. Contingency programs such as this are very effective marketing tools, rewarding winners for using a company's products during a high-profile

event. Fishermen love to copy a successful formula, and everybody wants to know the winner's "secret weapon."

### Almost like video games

"College fishing has come a long way in a relatively short time," says Bill Carson, Marketing Product Manager for Johnson Outdoors, parent company of the Humminbird and Minn Kota brands. "As bass fishing has become more sophisticated and almost like video games with all the technology, it has attracted more young people to the sport." He should know—Carson has represented Johnson Outdoors at every college Bassmaster event for the past 11 years. "Each of these events field about 250 boats, and they're all full with a waiting list to get in."

Johnson Outdoors offers product prizes and discounts to qualifying student anglers, and Carson takes a hands-on approach to promoting Minn Kota Ultrex trolling motors and Minn Kota battery chargers, Humminbird Solex and Helix MFDs and Lake Master cartography. He's always willing to help answer angler questions and even help with troubleshooting onboard electronics. The avid fishing veteran comes loaded with boxes of hats, shirts, and other branded apparel that young fishermen are all too happy to snap up and wear.

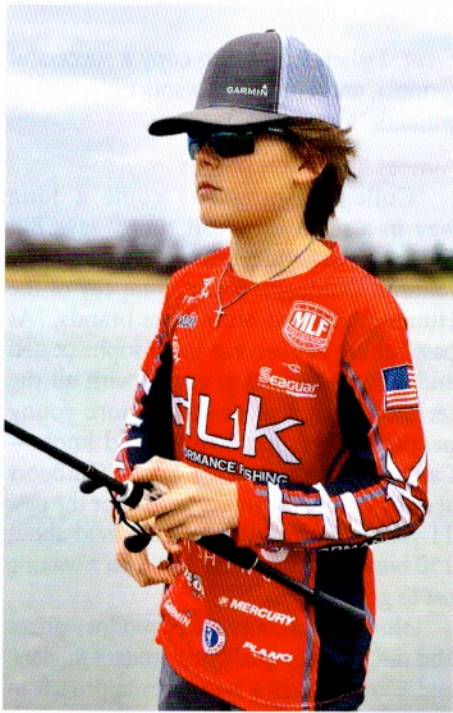
### Spreading the word

Companies sponsoring college and high school tournaments and anglers also benefit from the fact that these young athletes are extremely active on social media platforms. They are very motivated to build their own image and "brand" as competitive anglers—and this provides a good flow of exposure and digital content for sponsors who know how to take advantage of it.

According to Garmin's Dunn, another goal of this support is to build relationships with competitive anglers at an early age, with an eye toward keeping them in the fold as their

## Catch & release

From the smallest fishing club tournament to the biggest professional events, all bass competitions are strictly catch and release affairs. In fact, anglers usually will be penalized for bringing any dead fish to the scales. Sophisticated livewell systems aboard today's boats keep the fish alive and hearty throughout the day, allowing anglers to retain their largest fish for weigh in, up to the personal/team limit set for the event. Bass are then transferred to special weigh bags, then taken to the scales for weighing and perhaps a quick photo or two. The fish are then either returned to the water immediately or held in larger aerated holding tanks for later transfer back to the lake or river.



Working their way up the ranks are younger competitors like 11-year-old Carter Pjesky, who is sponsored by Garmin. Johnson Outdoors' Bill Carson says, "As bass fishing has become more sophisticated and almost like video games with all the technology, it has attracted more young people to the sport."

careers progress. It's quite possible that the next superstar of professional bass fishing is currently fishing on the college or even high-school level. "We believe that anglers we form bonds with now will be more likely to stay loyal to the Garmin brand as their pro careers blossom," says Dunn. "Of course, not all college anglers are going to become full-time pros. But they are likely to be avid fishermen for the rest of their lives, and this makes them great customers and brand ambassadors."

Smith, the former college angler whom I opened this article with, agrees. "There are fishermen who see this as a steppingstone to full-time professional bass fishing, and there are others who just want the experience of being on a sports team doing what they love. College fishing is great for both," says Smith. He adds that in addition to growing a new generation of future anglers, college fishing programs teach some important life skills.

Smith spent four years fishing primarily in smaller, regional college events, where he quickly learned the demands of not just tournament fishing, but also serving as president of his college team. Tasks like organizing travel, studying rules for different events, and submitting expense reports for reimbursement from the university imparted valuable lessons that he will lean on, whether in future business pursuits or his drive to eventually become a full-time pro. "For aspiring pro anglers like me, college fishing

is a great way to learn the ropes while figuring out if you're cut out for the life," he says.

### A rising tide

The growing popularity of college and high school fishing is like that old expression: a rising tide floats all boats. The boating and fishing industries have both invested heavily in research and marketing programs to appeal to a younger and more diverse target audience. Competitive youth fishing checks all the boxes when it comes to inclusion and diversity. You don't have to be able to slam dunk, or bench press 400 pounds, or throw a 98-mph curveball to be a star athlete. Men and women fish together and against each other on a level playing field. Fish don't care if you're black, white, or brown, rich or poor, come from the big city or some backwoods town. Bass are the great equalizer, ready to use their natural survival instincts and pea-sized brains to frustrate all those who pursue them with rod and reel.

### About the author

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