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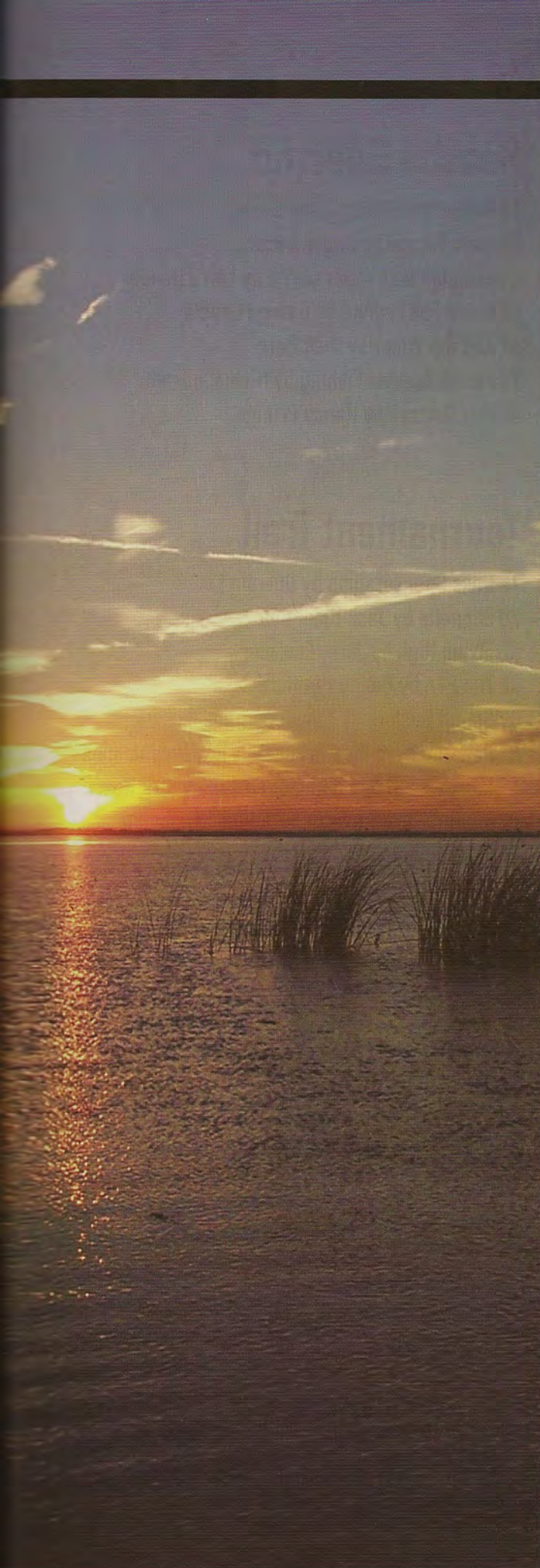
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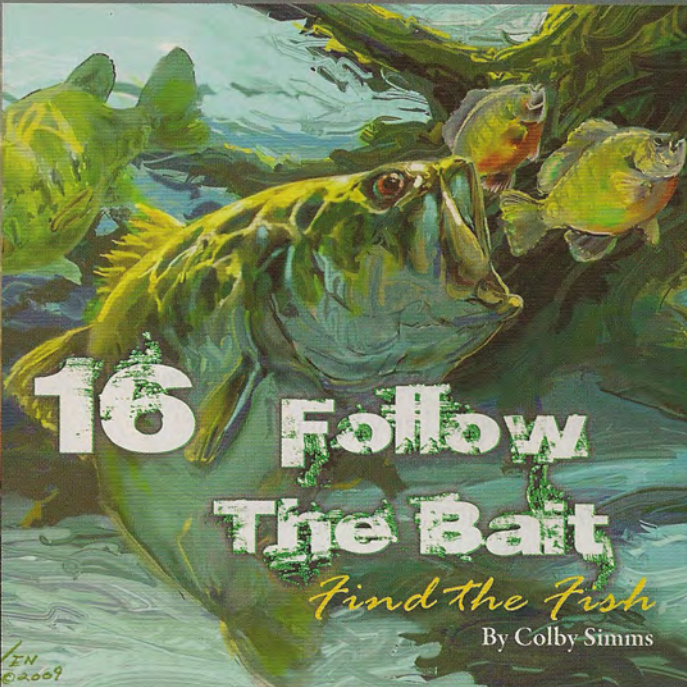


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# FUNDAMENTALS FOR FALL TOURNAMENT SUCCESS

By Dave Erwin

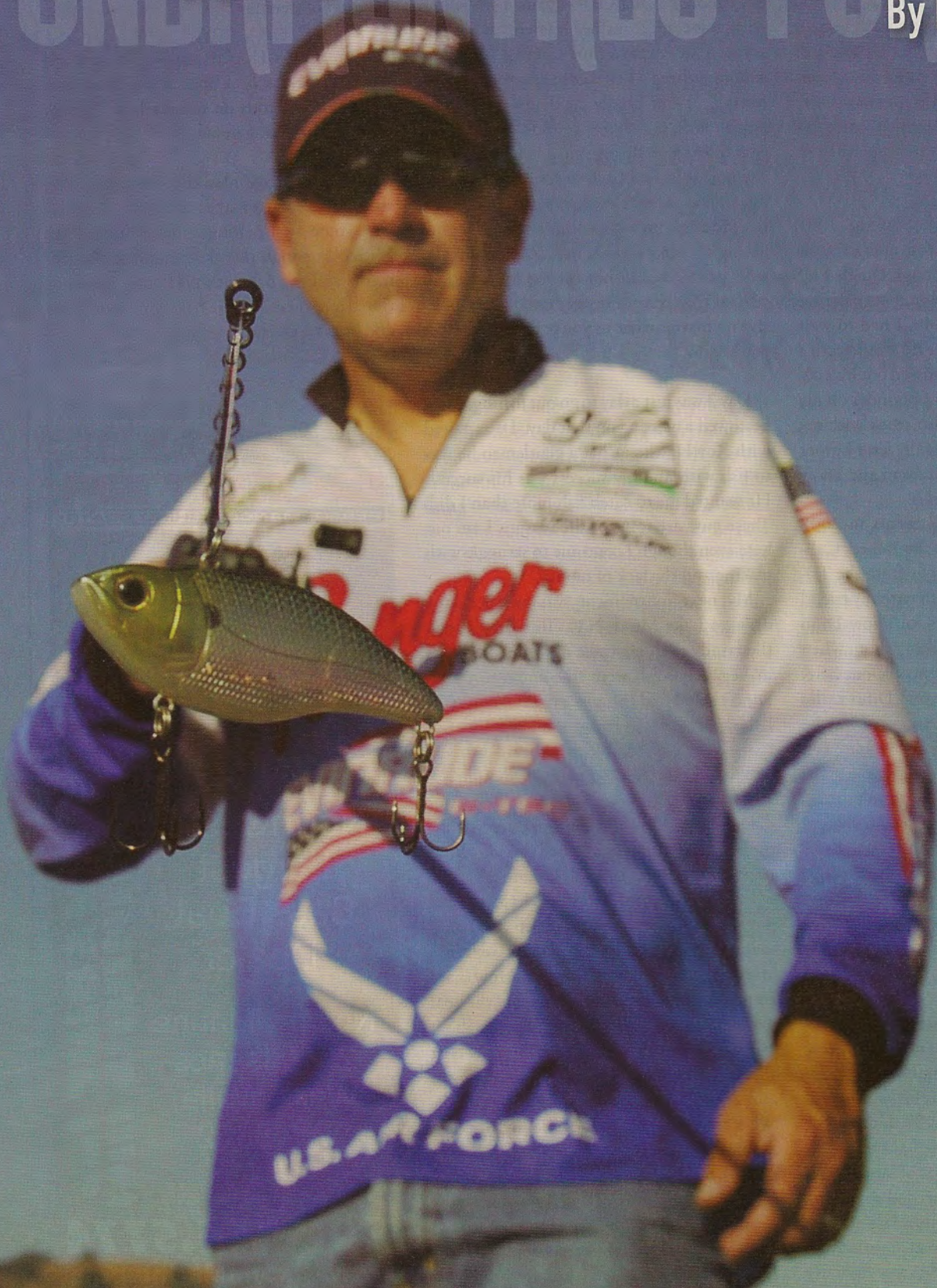


Photo By: Long Nguyen

When Mark Lassagne gave me the opportunity to write an article on tournament angling in the Fall, I got really excited. Fall is one of my favorite times of the year to fish and compete. The challenge for me is finding a way to condense this very broad subject into a single article. There is so much information available to all of us that we've seen most of the literatures on what the fish are doing this time of year and some of the techniques that will catch them. I think the best way to pull it all together can be summed up with how I prepared for and executed the last FLW National Guard Western Series event on Clear Lake, CA.

We had four days to practice for the four-day event. Fishing was fairly tough. However, once I found a fish, there were usually several more in the same area. As you prepare for a tournament in the Fall, remember that bass will school up this time of year so it's not necessary to hook more than one fish in a small area. In the Fall, and with this tournament, I would take a look at just one fish to determine the size of the other fish in the area. It's my experience that the fish on Clear Lake will be within one to two pounds of all fish within the school. When I found a pod of fish three pounds or larger, I marked the GPS location on my Humminbird, made a detailed note in the log, and quickly moved to another area. This approach of "catch one and immediately move" allowed me to efficiently cover all of the areas I wanted to look at before game day.

During practice I experimented with topwater and swimbaits. While both techniques were successful with my largest fish in practice coming on a swim-bait, I didn't have confidence I'd get five bites a day. I was catching multiple three to five pounders on a lipless crankbaits and soft plastics. Because the bite really wasn't that great, I based my plan on what I learned from the fish in practice and my confidence in the baits I'd be using. My top confidence bait in the Fall by far is the SPRO Aruku Shad. I use this bait throughout the year but in the Fall you won't find me without an Aruku on the deck of my boat. My back-up plan was to pitch a Texas-rigged Yamamoto Flappin' Hog in the same areas if the Aruku bite wasn't working.

During my four days of practice I was successful in locating the right fish in large bays near Konocti Harbor and also in the Rattle Snake arm. It was very windy on every day of practice so the fish were aggressively feeding on shad near the shoreline. The better fish were positioned fairly shallow in three to seven feet of water under the deeper docks. My most consistent bite came on the Aruku Shad. I'd make a long cast to the shallow end of the dock and then slow roll it into open water. The only time I was getting bit

was when the bait was in contact with the bottom. One thing I always do is if my cast won't allow me to put the Aruku in contact with the bottom or very close to a specific target, I don't even make the cast. I can't count the number of fish I've caught while hung up on the bottom. I now fully expect to get bit every time I'm hung-up. For whatever reason, the fish I catch while snagged on a rock are usually bigger fish. Rather than fear the snag... I look forward to it!

My plan for the tournament was to continually rotate through the most productive docks in the big bays. There were just enough of these docks that I felt I could rotate through all of the locations twice a day throughout the entire tournament. My arsenal would include four G-Loomis rods on the deck.

One Spooky Shad colored Aruku, one Clear Chartreuse Aruku (two color options for water clarity), one pitchin' stick for the Flappin' Hog and finally, a Yamamoto Senko. I'm sure you're familiar with follow-up baits

for topwater action. If a fish strikes and misses the bait, throw a Senko back at it as quickly as possible and that will sometimes generate a strike. I apply this same philosophy to crankin' in the Fall. Because the fish are stacked this time of year, there's a good chance more than one fish will be tracking your bait. If you miss a fish, that stung fish may not eat a follow-up bait but the others are still aggressive. Follow-up quickly with a Senko in the same general area and watch what happens.

Day one of the tournament: Dead calm. After four grueling days of fighting the wind in practice the water was like glass on the first day of the tournament. During low light conditions, I rotated through several areas with docks with the Aruku and only connect with two fish. I added another Loomis rod to the deck with a SPRO Dawg tied on for some topwater action. No Joy. I tried slowing down my presentation style by pitchin' the Flappin' Hog and found even that bite had also slowed down. I checked to see if the fish moved deeper. Still, I only managed to catch one other keeper. With less than two hours remaining and no wind at all, it was time to abandon the primary game plan. I remembered this one area down south near Red Bud Park where I had shaken off a couple of two pounders. I needed a limit so I put the afterburners on my stealthy "jet" (Ranger/Evinrude) and flew to the "limit" spot. Wow, what a limit spot. There were

a couple of key zones on the bank I was fishing that were loaded with three to four pounders! There was one tree and one bush in particular that held multiple fish. Both were on small points that extended slightly further than the rest of the straight bank. It was still calm but by this late in the afternoon, there was a slight current moving (thank goodness for the farmers irrigating their fields in the valley below). That current was all that was needed to activate the bait and turn on the bass. My partner and I quickly filled our limits and culled one time. There was just one problem; it was time to check in. I weighed in my lowest weight of the tournament on day one.

Tournament days two and three: The wind picked up on days two and three so I was able to mix in more of my primary areas with the Aruku and Flap-

"As you prepare for a tournament in the Fall, remember that bass will school up this time of year so it's not necessary to hook more than one fish in a small area."

pin' Hog. However, most of days two and three were spent culling through three and four pounders on the magical tree and bush. There were several factors that were key to catching the fish in and around those specific targets. The first was angle. I had to position the boat so that the cast was to deeper water before running the Aruku along side of the tree. It was best if the Aruku ticked the tree as the bait went by. The next factor was speed. I was burning the Aruku as fast as possible. As the larger fish shot out of the tree, the attacks on the Aruku were violent! This is the one time my lipless crankbait isn't in contact with the bottom. If I'm casting to a specific target and looking for a reaction bite then I like that bait moving at least a medium retrieve without contacting the bottom but rather bumping the target if possible. The third factor was based on a twist I always add when fishing a lipless crankbait. If I didn't get bit as I past the target I "killed" the Aruku and let it fall to the bottom then



Photo: www.tackletour.com



wouldn't be disturbed. This included – some of you will cringe with this one – breaking off more than 10 Aruku Shads and yards of 100% fluorocarbon line. I could have easily retrieved every lure however it would have destroyed the area. Yes, it was about a \$200 investment in preserving the location but my 20th place finish paid over \$14,000.

All three of my partners were amazed at the number of big bass stacked in such a small area. I can't thank those three guys enough for their patience and allowing me to execute my game plan. While FLW refers to them as co-anglers, I refer to these three anglers as true professionals. They all had their opportunities to fill a nice limit throughout their respective day with me yet each of them respected the gold mines that I had found during my four days of practice.

resumed with a yo-yo type retrieve. This dying bait technique was the ticket for triggering my best bites. The bigger fish were picking up the bait falling after the smaller fish were attacking it from above. Finally, I scored a few times with my follow-up bait by casting the Senko to the location a fish missed the Aruku. This one-two punch with a follow-up is the real deal!

There is one more key element that kept the fish biting in those relatively small zones. I kept the boat positioned just as far away as possible so the area

I've attempted to relay a lifetime of Fall bass fishing and tournament angling into a single article. There are many more subtleties to learn but those things can only be picked up by you on the water. I really hope that you'll be able to add a few of these fundamentals to your Fall tournament strategies. Good luck and I'll see you on the water!

Dave Erwin competed in his first bass tournament on Castaic Lake, CA in 1976. While serving in the Air

Force for more than 21 years, he continued competing and fished on numerous lakes and rivers across the US and around the world. Since turning pro in 2005, he has earned multiple top tens, made the cut in the FLW Stren Series and has a top twenty on the FLW Western Series National Guard Tour.

Dave is a volunteer with the Fishing in the City program, Pro/Teen events, Toys for the Troops' Kids and hosts the Practice with a Pro National Registry on his website [www.veteranangler.com](http://www.veteranangler.com). Dave is proud to be associated with the U.S. Air Force, Ranger Boats, Evinrude, Oasis Watersports, G-Loomis, Yamamoto Baits, SPRO, Virtual Lifeline, High Five Lure Co. and Baits by Boyce.



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