

The Non-Boater's Guide to Tournaments

By Nick Toman

If you're reading this article, chances are you're just beginning to fish tournaments, have your first tournament in the near future, or are curious about joining a club or association. You are probably a bit unsure about what to do, what to bring, what to wear, et cetera. No one wants to be the worried outsider prior to ooze-off, so here's a guide to help you get started and feel confident and comfortable on the water.

Finding a Tournament Appropriate to Your Interests

Most of us have already found a group of anglers we are comfortable fishing with, but for those who have not, here's a quick rundown. This step is far more important than most may think. If your first few tournament experiences are with a group of "hardcore" anglers and you are looking to just learn a bit and get on water once a month, chances are, you'll be turned off before you give tournaments a chance. Conversely, there are many leagues where it's more about meeting at Sammy's for a sandwich after the tournament, and people are very laid back - for those of us who are more competitive and really want to learn a lot, these anglers do not compose the group you'll want to join.

The best advice I can give you is to email the club presidents or tournament managers and simply ask what their philosophy embodies. A simple Web search will turn up many clubs in your area ranging from local dealership tournaments, to BASS Federation, to American Bass Anglers draw trail, to the Wal-Mart BFL and EverStart Pro-Am events.

If you are looking for an occasional tournament and are after more fun than competition, I'd stick with local tournaments run by boat dealers, bait shops, lure manufacturers and the like. The American Bass Anglers is a bit more competitive, but still embodies the philosophy of the "weekend angler." This is a true draw format where you will compete against both non-boaters and boaters alike. These tend to be smaller tournneys ranging from 10 to 50 boats. Chances are you can find an ABA division near you (<http://www.americanbassanglers.com>).

The Wal-Mart BFL tour is a Pro-Am, meaning you will only compete against other "amateurs" (non-boaters). These are great learning events once you are on the boat, but the hustle and bustle of a large tournament can be a turn-off of these events; often times, there will be a full 200 boat field, meaning 400 total anglers. As a first tournament, it can be a bit overwhelming. Additionally, these events are geographically sparse and require a lot of travel (see <http://www.flwoutdoors.com> for locations).

BASS Federation events have the most variance between a laid back and a hardcore composition of anglers - you really need to call club directors regarding their respective clubs. To obtain a list of BASS clubs, visit your state's Federation website via <http://www.bassmasters.com>.

What Fishing Equipment Should I Bring?

The most important advice I can give you regarding equipment, is that you must always remember you are fishing out of another individual's boat. Chances are their boat cost them thousands of dollars and they DO NOT want to see it messy, cluttered, and treated poorly by someone they hardly know.

With that in mind, you still have a job to do, namely catch bass. In terms of rods, I'd recommend no more than five. The number of rods is highly conditional: if you use only spinning gear, I'd only bring 3-4 rods. If you prefer to use casting outfits, 5 is plenty. Most boaters will allow you to use the rear pole ties; these ties typically hold about 4 rods comfortably (you can usually squeeze in 5 however). You do not want to be running across the lake without your rods tied down, or laying loose - you will lose your equipment, damage the boat, or worse yet, injure yourself with unsecured equipment.

In terms of rod types, personally I try to use 4 utility rods and 1 flipping/pitching stick. Keep in mind factors such as high wind, dense cover, water clarity, and methods such as fishing wood versus deep water finesse fishing. Ultimately these factors will pick your rods for you.

In terms of tackle, again adapt to the type of lake or river you are fishing. Personally, I tend to check Web postings and reports prior to an outing. If you post a question on a message board regarding what lures to use and explaining that you're new to the tournament scene, someone will help you out. A better idea is to call a local baitshop.

We all know what it's like to bring 2 gigantic tackle boxes onto a boat and pick and choose all day long. Unfortunately, in tournaments, this is an ill-advised luxury. I would recommend a simple soft-sided tackle system that can fit 3-4 tackle trays. Make sure one tackle tray can handle several spinnerbait/buzzbaits as these lures often create the most headache in storing.

Bring the lures you have the most confidence throwing! Be sure you bring a decent assortment of diving, floating, suspending crankbaits. Again, research into water clarity and conditions will dictate color schemes and lure selection. Plastics are invaluable and are small enough to fit into the side pockets of soft-sided storage systems - find out what locals recommend! Keep in mind that you are fishing with a partner, and you need to fish something similar in presentation speed, but different than what they choose to throw (unless of course, they are lighting it up). This is why having a small, yet diverse selection of lures is of utmost importance.

As a side note, a culling system can be a helpful tool. I use the simple rope systems that do have the bulky floats attached. Again, room is at a premium. Also, lure covers will save you worlds of time from having to unhook all your rods after a long run. The boater will have a measuring bar, and a culling balance so there's no need to tote those along.

What Clothing Should I Bring?

Naturally, you are thinking "why in the world is he writing about this? I'm no idiot!" The truth is that my first few tourneys, I thought the same thing. The air temperature was about 50 degrees, and I wore a thick sweatshirt, and jeans thinking I'd be fine; I couldn't have been more wrong. Once that boat hits the water at 65mph, and the chop is flying and you are getting wet, you'll thank me for this section.

At 55 degrees and below, several layers are recommended, particularly if you are going to run a ways. If there's chop, you'll get wet. I always bring water resistant bibs and a windproof/waterproof jacket if the temperature is hovering around the 50s or colder. You'll want the jacket to have a secure hood to keep your head warm. If the water is not choppy, you can leave these items in your car. Once you begin fishing, you can always shed layers (ask your boater where you can place your bibs and jacket if there's not a passenger side console to place them under). There is nothing worse than being too cold to tie a lure on!

During the warmer months, I prefer to wear pants that have removable bottoms, essentially converting from pants to shorts. These are usually UV proof and dry quickly after a wet run. Try to avoid cotton shirts and pants - these are not UV proof and dry slowly.

In terms of eye-protection, and fishing vision, definitely bring a pair of polarized sunglasses. Also, I find that a pair of skiing goggles makes a run in high chop or rain much easier on the eyes. Water hitting your face at 65mph is not fun.

Lastly, always remember to bring your own lifejacket! Do not depend on your partner to provide you with this. You should arrive as a self-sufficient angler minus a boat.

Insider Tips and Etiquette

- Remember to offer to help your partner launch and pull the boat in any way you can. They'll understand if you can't back a trailer down a ramp, but offer to hold the boat to the dock while they park the truck. True, they could easily tie it off, but this way you are showing you want to help out. Offer to pull the truck off the ramp once they've loaded the boat. Always offer to help wipe down the boat, and clean out the interior.
- Remember to offer your partner money for gas and ramp fees. \$20 is considered average, but adjust this pending on how much you run, ramp costs, etc.
- Never fish in front of your partner unless they give you explicit permission to do so. There's no quicker way to be in an uncomfortable situation! Instead, keep a close eye on where your partner has thrown and try to hit different spots.
- Throw a lure that is presented at a similar speed, or a faster speed than what your partner is throwing. The boat will move according to the type of lure they are fishing. You need to make sure you are not trying to fish a slow worm presentation when your partner is burning crankbaits. You'll want to throw something that acts differently than what your partner has just shown the fish. If he doesn't get the reaction strike off the crankbait you probably won't either, so show the fish a slider or a spinnerbait.
- Pre-rig anything you can. Don't show up without lures on your rods. If you're not sure what use, go with your 5 favorite lures. You'll need to change eventually, but at least have something on to get started. Often times, first light is the most productive part of the day. Don't waste this precious time tying on lures. If you need to change lures, try to do so while you are running. Rig your Carolina rigs on a Velcro tube for easy access and to save time. Know where all your tackle is stored, and even write on the boxes if necessary. Simply stated, be over prepared.
- When you put a rod down, use a lure cover to avoid tangles. Once you've hooked your lure to your pole, wrap the line from your lure to the tip around the pole once or twice - this will help keep your rods from becoming intertwined.
- Read the tournament rules closely. Many tournaments now allow non-boaters to run the trolling motor and to fish their choice of water for some duration. I don't like to flat out ask a boater if I can run the motor, so I usually ask him if he'd like me to run the motor as he changes lures, culls fish or tends to a backlash. This lets him know I am capable of running it. If you do not know how to use a trolling motor, learn first. Remember, you usually assume responsibility for any damage to the boat or motor when you are running it, so be careful.
- Finally, have patience. It can be frustrating if you want to try something and your partner clearly isn't in the same mind set. Getting to know your partner early in the day can prove useful for suggesting things to him later in the day. Just continue to adapt and focus on fishing in the present, not the honey hole across the lake.