

The Tournament Angler's Playbook

COMPETITIVE FISHING | All Levels

From first club event to competitive excellence.

Tournament formats, practice strategy, five years of winning pattern data, tournament-day decision frameworks, the mental game, forward-facing sonar in competition, and building a tournament career.

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CHAPTER 01

Tournament Formats

Bassmaster, MLF, and club events — how each works

Format	Scoring	Field Size	Entry Level
B.A.S.S. / Bassmaster Elite	5-fish limit by weight, 3 days	42-52 pros	Opens qualification
MLF Bass Pro Tour	Every fish scored above minimum, periods	50-66 pros	Invitational
FLW Tour	5-fish limit, 4 days	168-200 field	Opens qualification
Regional Opens (B.A.S.S./FLW)	5-fish limit, 1-2 days	50-400 boats	Open entry
Club Tournaments	5-fish limit, 1 day	15-80 boats	Open entry — best starting point

WHERE TO START

Start at your local bass club. Club events have low stakes, experienced anglers around you, and immediate feedback on your decisions. The learning per dollar at a club event is 10x that of a large open.

CHAPTER 02

Pre-Tournament Practice

What to look for and what to save

Pre-tournament practice is intelligence gathering, not fishing. You are mapping the fishery, identifying patterns, and building a tournament-day plan — not catching fish. The mistake most beginners make: they fish during practice. Pros scout during practice.

The Practice Framework

- Days 1-2: Cover as much water as possible. Identify every productive pattern and area — do not stop to fish an area out.
- Day 3: Narrow your plan to 3 primary patterns and 5-8 specific spots.
- Final day: Rest. Do not touch the water. Mentally run through your tournament-day game plan.
- Save your best spots for the tournament — do not practice exactly where you will fish competitively.
- Document everything: GPS coordinates, depth, structure type, lure, retrieve, and time of day for each productive area.

CHAPTER 03

What Wins Tournaments

Five years of pattern data from Bassmaster and MLF

Bassmaster Classic Results 2020-2025

Year	Location	Winner	Key Pattern	Primary Lure
2020	Lake Guntersville, AL	Hank Cherry	Shallow docks, pre-spawn	Picasso Dock Rocket Jig + Jack Hammer
2021	Lake Ray Roberts, TX	Hank Cherry	Summer offshore (COVID delay)	Jerkbait + offshore finesse
2022	Lake Hartwell, SC	Jason Christie	Prespawndocks + shallow structure	Jerkbait + Zoom Fluke Stick
2023	Knoxville, TN	Jeff Gustafson	Smallmouth via FFS / moping	Z-Man Jerk ShadZ on Damiki rig
2024	Northport, AL	Justin Hamner	Highland reservoir via FFS	Hard jerkbait + LiveScope
2025	Grand Rapids, MN	Easton Fothergill	Great Lakes smallmouth	Northern finesse patterns

Patterns That Repeat — Region by Region

Region / Water Type	Spring Winner	Summer Winner	Fall Winner
Southeast Grass Lakes	Prespawnd ChatterBait, flipping jig	Frogging, punching mats	Shad swimbait, spinnerbait
Texas Big Reservoirs	Suspending jerkbait, swimbaits	Deep crankbait 18-30 ft	Offshore crankbait, lipless
Highland Reservoirs	Jerkbait on prespawnd points	FFS jighead minnow, bluff walls	FFS suspended fish
Great Lakes Smallmouth	Tube, drop shot prespawnd	FFS jighead, topwater schools	Finesse drop shot, glide bait

QUICK REFERENCE — THE FIVE MOST RELIABLE TOURNAMENT PATTERNS

- > Cold water jerkbait (45-62F): Wins events from November through April on virtually every fishery
- > Prespawn ChatterBait (55-65F): Outperforms spinnerbaits on grass fisheries
- > Summer ledge crankbait: Most consistent summer offshore pattern across all regions
- > FFS jighead minnow: The forward-facing sonar era lure for suspended fish
- > Heavy flipping jig: Consistent in every event where bass are in vegetation

CHAPTER 04

Tournament Day Strategy

Period by period decision-making

Period	Priority	Execution	Decision Point
Launch to 9 AM	Execute primary pattern on best spot	Fish confidently — do not second-guess	Is it producing? Yes: stay. No: move after 45 min
9 AM - Noon	Secondary pattern or second-best location	Cover water efficiently	Are fish here? Assess by 10:30 AM
Noon - 2 PM	Find the day's best active bite	Adjust to conditions — offshore or specific	What is the BEST bite available right now?
2 PM - Check-in	Upgrade your limit if possible	Return to best producing area	Cull for max weight — track weight carefully

CHAPTER 05

The Mental Game

Pressure, adjustments, and staying focused under competition

THE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH

The best anglers on tournament day are not the ones who fish the best. They are the ones who make the best decisions under pressure. Everyone can fish their best on a practice day. The mental game determines who wins when it matters.

- Missed fish and slow starts are normal. Do not panic and abandon your plan within the first hour.
- If a spot is not producing after 45 minutes, move. Do not wait for it to turn on.
- Never make a major pattern change based on one missed fish or one unproductive cast.
- Cull decisions require practice. Do not wait until tournament day to understand the math.
- The angler who fishes with confidence catches more fish — confidence affects presentation subtleties.
- Keep a mental log during the day: what worked, when, where. Patterns shift during the tournament.

CHAPTER 06

Gear and Preparation

What to check before every tournament

QUICK REFERENCE — PRE-TOURNAMENT GEAR CHECKLIST

- > All rods pre-rigged with tournament-day lures and fresh line
- > Hooks are sharp — file or replace any that are dull
- > Livewell system tested and running at correct temperature
- > GPS waypoints from practice saved and labeled
- > Rain gear, sun protection, and hydration packed
- > Batteries at full charge: trolling motor, sonar, livescope
- > Spare components: extra hooks, sinkers, leader material
- > Rules reviewed — know the regulations for this specific event

CHAPTER 07

Forward-Facing Sonar in Competition

How to use the technology to its full advantage

FFS changed tournament fishing more than any technology since the depthfinder. In 2025, MLF restricted it to one of three periods per day. Understanding when to use your FFS period is now a critical strategic decision.

Scenario	Use FFS Period When	Save FFS Period When
Suspended fish on clear water	Bait is best presented to visible fish	Fish are shallow and accessible without it
Early morning bank bite	You do not need FFS for visible structure fishing	Wait — save it for midday deep application
Offshore ledge mid-day	Fish are suspended and visible on the screen	Wind has them active and biting blind lures
Pressure situation (behind)	Need to be precise to catch a specific fish	You are on a consistent biting pattern

CHAPTER 08

Building a Tournament Career

From club events to regional to national competition

Level	Events	Average Field	What to Master
Club / Local	Monthly club events	15-60 boats	Fish-finding, pattern recognition
Regional Opens	State and regional federations	50-200 boats	Consistent patterns, pressure management
B.A.S.S. Opens / FLW Co-Angler	National Opens as co-angler	100-400 boats	Adapting to unfamiliar boats and partners
B.A.S.S. Opens — Boater	National Opens, full field	100-400 boats	Full tournament execution independently
Elite / Bass Pro Tour	Invitation via qualification	42-66 pros	Elite pattern development, media management

THE CAREER PATH TRUTH

Most Elite anglers competed in club events for 5-10 years before going to regional events. The learning compound interest from club fishing is enormous. There is no shortcut. Fish club events obsessively. Learn from every angler around you.