



TDN.com

The Daily News Online - Serving The Lower Columbia

Contestants go for Bass gold at Silver Lake

Friday, April 17, 2009 12:13 AM PDT

By [Tom Paulu](#)

SILVER LAKE — Bass tournaments are big business. Five of the top national tournaments offer \$1 million in total prizes, and that's the top award in the Forrest Wood Cup in Georgia. There's even a \$1 million prize in the FLW Fantasy Fishing tournament.

That's more than 1,000 times as much money as the top bass team won last Saturday during the Silver Lake Open. Still, the event sponsored by the Mount St. Helens Bass Masters drew bass anglers with plenty of fervor for their sport. "There's something about bass fishing that's very addictive," said Dan Collins of Battle Ground, whose team landed the biggest fish of the day. "I think I'll get bit every time I cast." The tournament is one of 10 that Bass Masters compete in around the Pacific Northwest.

At first light, 70 anglers convened at the Silver Lake resort. They had to attend a 6 a.m. meeting to go over the rules, and each two-person team paid \$110 to enter. At 6:30 a.m. came "blast off," a term held over from the days when a shotgun was fired to signify the start. These days, in the interest of safety, club vice-president Jimmy Allis of Longview gets things going with a megaphone.

The 35 boats with bright green bands wrapped around motors roared way from the dock at 5-second intervals and spread out around the lake. Anglers cast the specialized arsenal of bass fishing. And tossed, and reeled in, and flipped the lures out again and again. "We use a lot of plugs and spinners and plastic imitations of fish," Allis said. The most popular one Saturday was a black-and-blue jig 'n pig, he said. No live bait is allowed, and anglers cannot get within 25 yards of each other, unless invited.

"In the spring, the fish will all get up in the shallows, under bushes," Allis said. "Sometimes you either get a fish on or you break it off."

Each boat must be equipped with a live well that keeps the fish alive after they're caught. Allis said the morning routine includes checking the live wells to make sure no contestant sneaks a bass aboard before the tournament starts.

The temptation to cheat is there “any time there’s competition,” Allis said. Each team can keep as many as five fish alive in the well. If a larger fish is caught, it can take the place of a smaller one. Teams are penalized for dead fish at the weigh-in.

Many of the contestants Saturday were club members familiar with Silver Lake, though some had never fished it before and didn’t bother with pre-tournament day scouting. “The higher the entry fee, the bigger the payout, the more time people invest in homework,” Allis said.

There’s a legitimate reason for those sleek boats with 200 horsepower motors, Allis said. A faster boat means more time fishing and less time traveling around the lake. “If you’re fishing in a rowboat, it would take you 45 minutes to get back” for the weigh-in, Allis said. “In one of these you can fish until 2:57 and be back.” But face it, Allis admitted, “we’re all boys with toys.”

He motored around the lake at 40 mph, which seems faster when you’re only a few feet above the water. A snappy bass boat can run to \$55,000, he said, but “you can enjoy the sport for something far less than that.”

Most local bass aficionados don’t spend as much time chasing salmon, steelhead or sturgeon, Allis said. For one thing, the spring chinook season conflicts with a prime time for bass fishing.

The 50-degree chill and slow bite had chased some contestants off the lake by 2 p.m. They swapped yarns around a campfire as the weigh-in crew got scales, tanks and paperwork ready. Promptly at 3 p.m., most of the boats returned and were duly checked in. Stubby contestants carried water-filled bags with the day’s catch to brothers James and Dale Sanders, who were in charge of the scales.

The Sanders team would hoist the entire catch and, separately, the single largest fish onto the scales, after which the bass were quickly returned to the water bags. After the weigh-in was over, a boat carries the bass back to the lake.

“I lost one first thing in the morning,” Collins said, but caught two more after that. “It was brutal today. I was freezing.” Collins’ biggest fish of the day was a 5.81-pound lunker.

No one came close to challenging the lake record, which Dale Sanders caught 38 years ago. His record fish weighed 10 pounds, 2 ounces. And yes, he caught it during a bass tournament.

During the weigh-in, Victor Rose and Jim Kidder of Brier, Wash., which is north of Seattle, stashed the gear on their boat. “We didn’t get one -- scratch,” Kidder said. It was the team’s first time fishing Silver Lake, which is shallower than water they’re used to.

“We tried everything,” Rose added. They had plenty of choices of gear. Each stashed 10 rigged fishing poles in compartments below the deck, along with boxes and boxes of tackle. Each rod is set up for a different fishing technique. “Every one of these boats is probably equipped as well as this one,” Rose said. “We’re tackle whores,” another angler quipped.

Finally, it was time for tournament director Mike Williams to take the microphone and announce the results. The 70 anglers caught a total of 31 fish, weighing an average of just over 3 pounds. Because the tournament fell on the day before Easter, organizers added a season twist, stashing a dozen plastic eggs on the shore around the lake. "All 12 of them got returned at the end of the day," Allis said, with winners getting Starbucks gift cards that might help wake them up for the next tournaments.

And the winning team was Terry and Kim Jensen, a husband and wife from Vancouver. Their four fish totaled 14.15 pounds. After bestowing a kiss on each other, the Jensens shared the secrets of their success. "Spinnerbaits," Kim said. "Lots of luck," her husband added. The Jensens enter six or eight bass tournaments a year. They plan to reinvest their \$952 winnings into future bass expenses and entry fees. We'll use it for the next two tournaments," Terry Jensen said.

For more information, visit www.mt-st-helens-bassmasters.com/index.html