

# BASSIN' WITH FINESSE

*Lures, Techniques and Strategies  
for  
Indifferent, Spooky,  
Passive and Finicky Bass*

by Rich Zaleski\*

Certain instances in bass fishing are guaranteed to get your adrenaline pumping. Think about the rush you get when you spy a wake approaching your surface spoon and anticipate that any second the surface will erupt in a giant swirl and your lure will disappear into the mouth of a mammoth bass. Or how about the exhilaration you feel when your crankbait stops dead in its tracks, as it's attacked for invading the territory of a lunker bass? Techniques designed to exploit the aggressive tendencies of bass are exciting to use—*when they're working*. As the saying goes, "When they're hot, they're positively hot!" Unfortunately, the other extreme is often just as accurate, "When they're not, they're absolutely not!"

The "catchability" of bass depends on the specific environment (habitat) being fished, the calendar period, current weather

and water conditions and the amount of fishing pressure the body of water receives. Even in a "best case" situation, bass may exhibit a truly aggressive nature only 50% of the time and in most waters, 10% is more realistic. Just stop a moment and think. How often have you experienced a really hot bass bite? Probably 10% to 20% of the time is the average.

So how can you catch bass the rest of the time? No single answer will provide sure-fire success in every case, but one tactic that usually works for me is a system and fishing philosophy based on "finesse." The kind of excitement that some fishing techniques provide may not be inherent to finesse fishing, but finesse puts bass in the boat. Hey, that's pretty exciting to me! To better understand finesse and how it is applied to bass fishing, let's define exactly what we mean.

*From Zaleski's Standard Bass*

*Fishing Dictionary: Finesse —*

(1) The cumulative effect of the subdued, subtle, slow, simple and seductive aspects of certain artificial lure presentations used to catch stubborn, finicky, spooky and/or inactive bass.

(2) To use techniques and presentations which incorporate finesse. After a cold front, it's often necessary to *finesse* the bass.

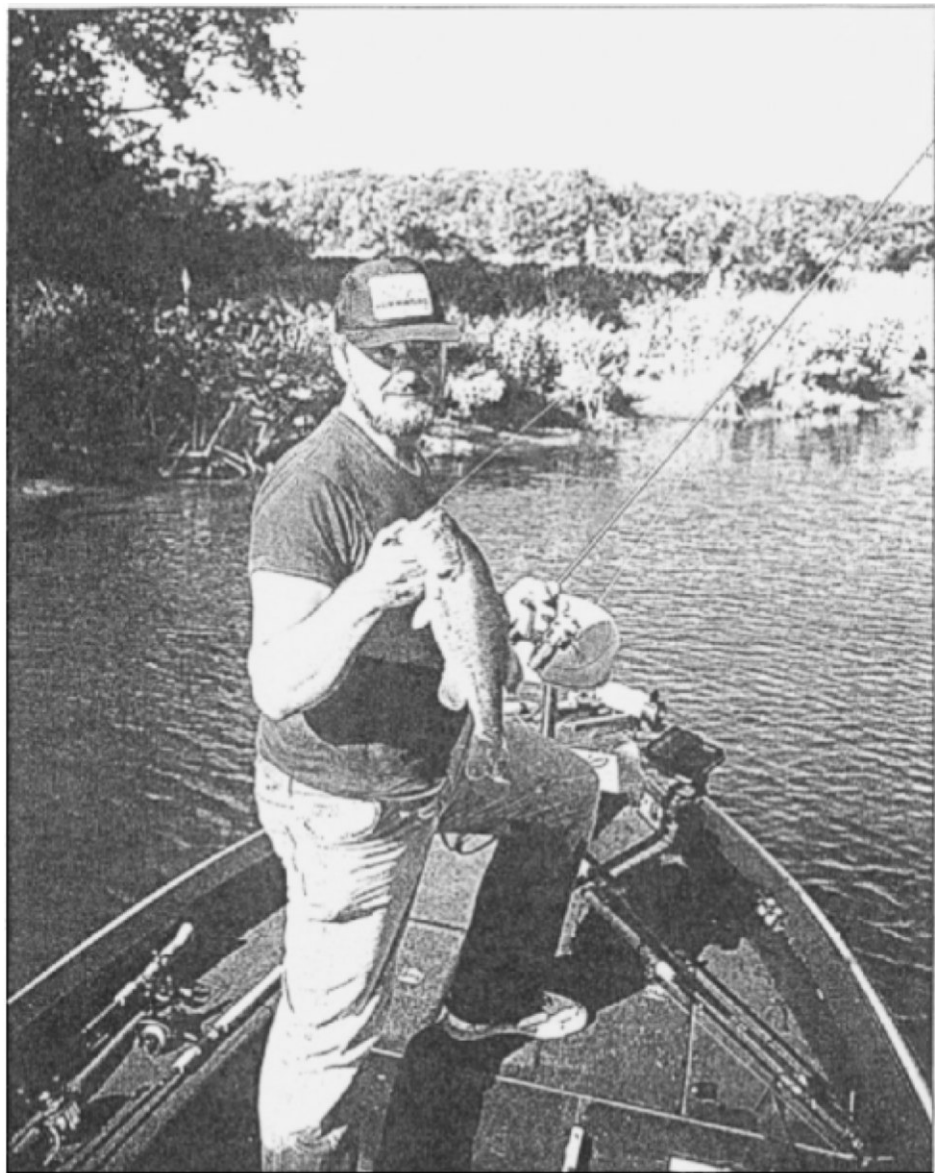
(3) Descriptive of a lure or technique that incorporates and depends on any or all aspects of finesse. A 4-inch worm is a *finesse* lure.

(4) Descriptive of a set of conditions that are most appropriately fished with finesse tactics. When you encounter cold, clear water, you're usually faced with a *finesse* situation.

I've employed varying degrees of finesse to improve catches under tough conditions for years. While angling pressure increased during the past decade, so did the frequency which I used maximum finesse in my presentations. Just over half the bass I caught during the 1986 season, for instance, responded to finesse tactics!

Relying on finesse often has refined my strategy to the point where guesswork is eliminated. When bass are indifferent, using presentations that minimize negative stimuli is the first step toward maximizing your catch. Many factors commonly used to trigger a positive reaction from aggressive bass can actually serve as negative stimuli to nonaggressive fish!

Current bass fishing theories suggest that the more visible a lure is and the more pronounced the vibration, the more likely it will be taken by a bass. These theories are on target when you're dealing with active bass, but they don't apply to finesse fishing for inactive, nonaggressive bass. The key factors in finesse presentations are (1) subtlety, (2) forage representation and (3) ease of capture. The most productive finesse lures exhibit varying degrees of these qualities. Conversely, lure characteristics that detract from them decrease the degree of finesse possible with any presen-



*Finesse fishing has proven effective on lakes, rivers and reservoirs all across North America. Here's Rich Zaleski with a largemouth bass caught from a fallen tree in a side creek of a tidal river. After flipping and spinnerbaiting the cover unsuccessfully, he fished this bass on a 4-inch grape worm. Low impact presentations often mean more fish!*

tation. Finesse fishing success is a matter of eliminating negative triggers rather than attempting to incorporate positive triggers into a presentation.

When you suspect there are bass in the area, but you're not catching them, try a different angling philosophy rather than simply changing lures or giving up. Subtle up your presentation and cut down at least a few notches on size, color (visibility), speed and vibration. Couple this "low impact" presentation with exact lure placement and a slow-motion technique, and you'll get fish.

When used as an integral part

of a total finesse system, small, dull-colored, slow-moving lures that don't produce excessive flash or vibration will catch fish. There's nothing intimidating about the appearance or action of these lures, and they're particularly good at vaguely representing a bass' natural forage. Oddly enough, in finesse fishing situations, a *vague representation* is often more productive than an *exact duplication*!

"How is a bass going to locate a lure that doesn't make some noise or stand out from the background?" Well, have you noticed there's a notable shortage of fluorescent chartreuse, rattling,

vibrating prey species in the water? Bass would starve to death if they couldn't locate naturally camouflaged prey!

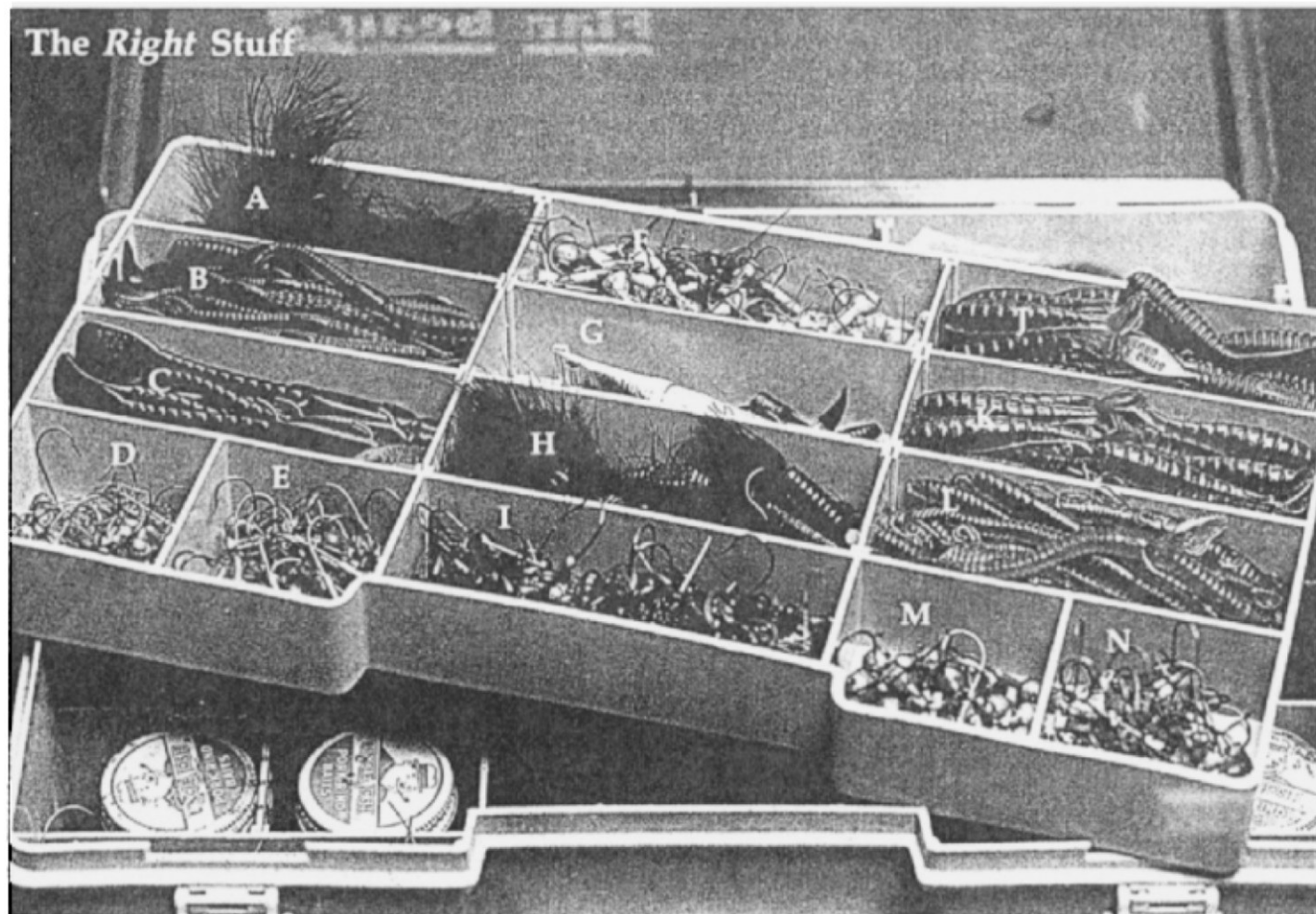
Think about this. If a presentation is a perfect imitation of a natural minnow and there are a million minnows around, the odds of a lure being the one selected by a bass are a million to one. That's 1,000,000 to 1 folks! Finesse lures are not designed to mimic any specific natural prey, just to hit at being something

alive and edible. They will appear natural to the fish, but will look, sound, move or somehow act out of the ordinary. Even in the midst of a bounty of natural forage, a finesse lure will identify itself as an individual target—easy prey.

Let's consider the last of the three elements mentioned earlier—ease of capture. Prey that appear unusual are recognized as an easy target by a predator. Lure presentations will inherently differ from natural prey and this can make

them attractive to the predatory instincts of the bass!

Proximity, though, is the single most important element in ease of capture. The key is to put a natural appearing lure that's within the normal size range of bass prey, close to the fish. Then control the lure so it appears alive and non-threatening. Odds are good that a bass will suck the lure in, even if only out of curiosity. The bass may reject it almost immediately, but the odds of



(A) 1/8-oz. and 1/4-oz. black hair jigs and black marabou jigs.

(B) 4" and 5" grape worms. The Zoom Worm is one of my favorites. (Zoom Worm Co., 384 Jennings Mill Rd., Athens, GA 30606) Mann's Jelly Worm, Charlie Brewer Slider Worm, and other slender, flat-tailed worms are good, too.

(C) 4" grape Ding-A-Ling lizards. (Zetabait Co., P.O. Box 7985, Jacksonville, FL 32210)

(D) 1/16-oz. round jigheads (unpainted).

(E) 1/8-oz. round jigheads (unpainted).

(F) 1/8-oz. wire-guard jigheads (Hankie Lure Co., 2 Germantown Rd., Danbury, CT 06810).

(G) 4" to 5" black worms. Mr. Twister Phenoms, Hankie Screwtails and a few motor oil Mr. Twister Phenoms and Producto Lures' Jakes' Tournament Worms.

(H) 1/8-oz. and 1/4-oz. Lindy Fuzz-E-Grubs, some smoke/

black homemade plastic grub bodies with marabou tail and a few Burke 4" split-tail eels.

(I) 1/4-oz. wire-guard jigheads (Hankie Lure Co.). There are both plain unpainted and black jigheads, plus a few tied with black or bronx hair.

(J) Smoke Mr. Twister Sassy Grubs are the best but hard to find. (Hankie Lure Co.)

(K) More Sassy Grubs and some smoke Mann's Stingray Grubs.

(L) 4" smoke worms. Favorites are Hankie Screwtail, Charlie Brewer Slider Worm and the discontinued Mr. Twister Scamps and Sintipedes.

(M) 1/4-oz. round jigheads.

(N) 1/16-oz. and 1/8-oz. Spider Slider heads, snagless type (Charlie Brewer's Slider Co., P.O. Box 130, 511 E. Gaines St., Lawrenceburg, TN 38464).

hooking a fish with your lure in its mouth for even half a second are infinitely better than if the fish completely ignored your offering.

### **FINESSE LURES**

Productive bassin' finesse lures include marabou jigs, soft plastic baits and fly & rind combos. The most effective lures have qualities that minimize negative triggers, yet vaguely represent natural forage. Let's look at what a "finessin' fool" like myself relies on to get finicky bass attached to the other end of the line.

Before delving into my private stock, be advised that I adhere to a lure-selection philosophy that's contrary to what most bassers seem to live by. Instead of "I need one if it might catch a fish at some time," I believe, "I don't want one unless it will catch fish that I couldn't otherwise catch." This philosophy extends to all my tackle, but nowhere is it more evident than in my finesse-lure selection. The top tray of my tri-level tackle box is the finesse

section and this gives you a hint of how important I believe finesse fishing is! OK, let's see what's in there.

### **JIGS 'N THINGS**

Jigs, jigheads, more jigheads, and still more jigheads. Plain, unpainted, round jigheads are the tools most frequently used to make a hunk of soft plastic into a finesse-fishing lure. You'll find a lot of plain jigs in 1/16-, 1/8- and 1/4-ounce sizes. Additionally, there are some 1/8- and 1/4-ounce jigheads with an Aberdeen style jig-hook and a single-strand wire snag-guard. This guard is brush resistant and it doesn't appear to effect hooking success—I like 'em. To provide "Texas style" snag-proof rigging for small plastic worms, there are a bunch of 1/16- and 1/8-ounce Charlie Brewer Spider Slider heads. These heads were chosen for their effectiveness in presenting small worms. Plus, they're sure hooking as an exposed hook rig, yet will snake through brush and grass easily.

In addition to the plain jig-

heads, there is a selection of marabou feather and hair jigs. The black marabou jigs in 1/8- and 1/4-ounce sizes are fished "au naturel," because dressing a marabou jig interferes with the fluid movement of the feathers.

Hair jigs are another matter, however, and these are normally fished "tipped." They're used to present a small piece of pork to the fish. You'll find some black and a few dark brown jigs in 1/8- and 1/4-ounce sizes. For fishing in cover, most hair jigs are tied on wire-guard jigheads.

### **PORK RIND**

My favorite uncle and I have caught a lot of bass together over the years, and I wouldn't think of leaving him out of my finesse selection. You'll have to look under the top tray, but you can bet ol' Uncle Josh is in there somewhere! There are #101 frogs, U-3 leeches and some L-2 Twin-Tailed eels. Again, top color choices are black and crawdad brown.

A top producing lure is an 1/8- or 1/4-ounce jig with a pork trailer often called a "fly & rind." A fly & rind doesn't often catch the numbers of bass that a grub or 4-inch worm might, but it's the most size selective big fish finesse lure. When fishing is so tough you must work your tail off for one or two hits, use a fly & rind. This combo is deadly on big fish, and if you're only going to catch one fish, it might as well be a big one.

### **WORMS**

A 4-inch worm is the #1 summertime lure and for my finesse fishing, worms between 3 and 5 inches fit this category. Colors? Grape, smoke and black are favorites with a few brown or motor-oil worms thrown in for experimenting. Skinny, flat-tailed grape worms dominate my assortment, but in a pinch, I'll settle for a small worm with a twister-type tail. The slender 6-inch Zoom Worm is ideal, and it can be cut off to change size quickly.

What about color? The hardest thing for me to accept was that nonaggressive fish in off-colored water respond to the same trig-



## "Finessful" Retrieves

**Lift and Drop**—The standard retrieve technique for almost any jig-type presentation. Cast; allow the lure to sink to the bottom; then slowly lift and drop the rod tip while retrieving the lure. In finesse situations, a slack-line lure drop is necessary, because it allows the lure to find its way into creases and tight inside corners. Keep in mind the importance of getting the lure as close as possible to the fish.

**Swim and Drop**—A method to use when you spot a bass, or when fishing a visible shallow object or break. Sometimes, even the lure entering the water near the fish can spook them. Remember, we're talking about fish that are already pretty finicky.

Here's how it's done. Cast well past the target (onto shore if necessary). With the rod tip held high, crank the reel to swim the lure back a few inches under the surface. The instant your lure reaches the object (or gets within a foot or so of the visible fish), stop reeling, lower the rod tip and let the lure sink. Don't "guide" the lure down or maintain any tension on the line; simply drop the rod tip. Here's what happens: the lure silently approaches, and when it nears the fish, it "dives for cover." This maneuver is typical of what prey might do when unexpectedly encountering a predator. This reaction can trigger a bass.

OK, once the lure contacts bottom, wait a few seconds, then pick up most of the slack out of the line before gingerly lifting the rod tip. If you feel any resistance, set the hook. If not, give the lure a slight nudge or shake the rod tip a little. There may be a fish "studying" the lure, and a sudden (but not alarming) movement could trigger a hit. When you feel a hit or see your line move off to the side, set the hook immediately.

There are days when the swim-and-drop technique is dynamite. Occasionally, I don't even bother "feeling" for a fish

or trying to trigger a delayed hit. A few seconds after the lure sinks next to an object, I simply set the hook. This sixth sense reaction gets me a lot of fish.

As you work through an area, you might encounter an object or spot a fish lying just beneath the surface in a shaded area. In such situations, I often combine the swim and drop with different retrieve techniques.

**Stationary Retrieve**—This retrieve maximizes the time a lure spends in close proximity to inactive bass. Natural prey is not in constant motion, and finicky bass will often take a lure resting motionless (or nearly so) on the bottom but will snub a moving presentation.

You can easily either shift into a stationary retrieve from the swim-and-drop technique or fish a lure stationary.

The stationary retrieve is simple. Cast and allow the lure to sink on a slack line; when the worm or grub is positioned in the "crease" at the base of a break, let it sit there motionless. Watch the line at the point where it disappears beneath the surface. If any sudden or unexpected movement is noted, set the hook. Otherwise, just wait at least 30 seconds. Sometimes triggering a bass will require waiting much longer. Be patient! Nothing happening? Either reel in the lure and cast to another target or continue the retrieve with a more standard lift/drop. The stationary retrieve can be tedious, but when the fish are really turned off, it may be the only consistent way to tempt 'em. Admittedly, it can be a real drag when it's not working.

**Drag Retrieve**—Here's a retrieve that can work wonders on tough-to-catch fish, especially in cold water. Instead of using a lift/drop technique, simply retrieve the lure slowly enough to maintain bottom contact throughout the working portion of the retrieve.

Keep the rod at the 9 to 10 o'clock position and retrieve the

lure very slowly and steadily, either with rod movement or by reeling, or a combination of both. The vibration when the lure contacts bottom is probably a fish-attracting quality. Based on this assumption, I researched and experimented with different jighead weights. My results show that the general tendency is to use lighter jigs on mud or sand and heavier jigs on rock/gravel bottoms.

Rather than giving off a definite "tick" or "tug," a hit will just make the jig seem heavy or spongy. Here's what to do when you "feel" a fish. Since the line is tight and your rod is in position, simply continue the retrieve into a hook-setting sweep.

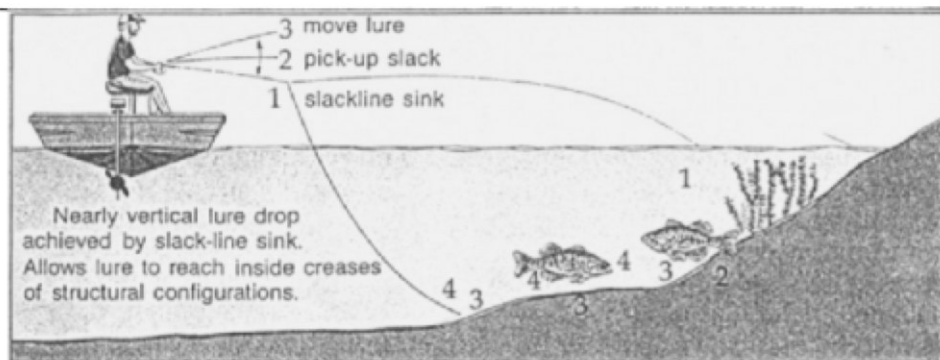
Of course, "dragging" can be combined with other retrieve variations. If you lose bottom contact, lower the rod tip and incorporate a slack-line sink until the jig hits bottom again. Then give the jig a hop or two, or even use a stationary retrieve, before resuming the drag.

**The Drift**—This tactic is more a lure placement technique than a retrieve style, and it's for moving water (current) situations. Instead of trying to fight the current, use it to your advantage.

Here's the secret to drifting a lure. The bulk and buoyancy of the lure must be balanced with the current flow and the depth being fished. This allows the lure to drift naturally as it sinks with the current. Cast upstream of the spot that you want to fish and let the current carry the lure into position. You can adjust the drift by applying tension with the rod or line. The right balance of head weight, lure size and "upstream lead" is a matter of judgement and comes with practice and experience. I've used this valuable technique often to catch fish while working behind anglers flipping or spinnerbaiting to downed trees or pilings in a river. □

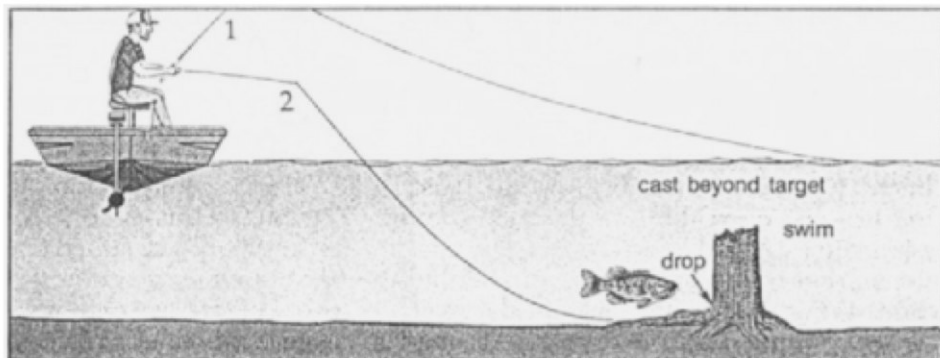
## Lift & Drop

Nearly vertical lure drop achieved by slack-line sink. Allows lure to reach inside creases of structural configurations. (1) As soon as lure hits water, drop rod tip; leave bail open. (2) When lure hits bottom, reel in slack. Then slowly raise rod tip. (3) Move lure with rod. (4) Drop rod tip to allow lure to sink on slack line. Maintain finger contact with line as lure sinks, to detect subtle hits.



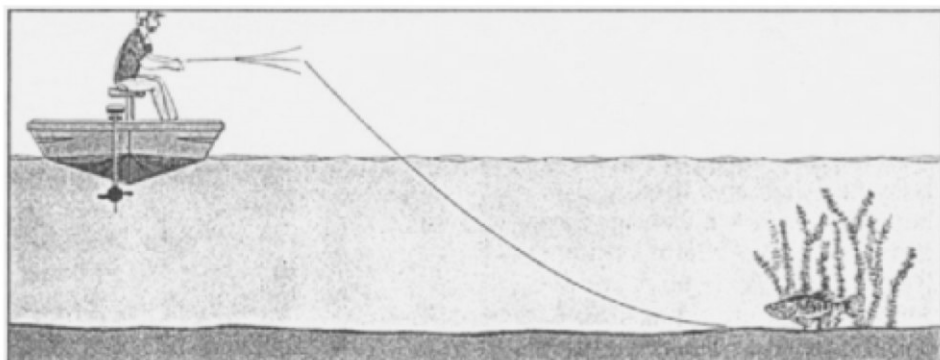
## Swim & Drop

(1) With rod held high, use reel to swim lure just under the surface. (2) When lure reaches target, quickly drop rod tip. This allows the lure a straight, nearly vertical drop into the prime crease or inside turn areas.



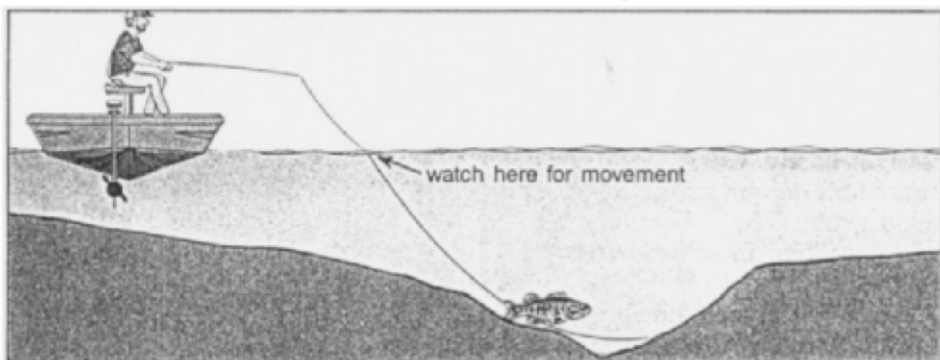
## Stationary Retrieve

(1) When lure is positioned in the inside corner or crease, leave line slack. (2) Continue to leave line slack. (3) Continue to leave line slack. (4) After what seems like an eon, crank in most slack line. (5) While maintaining finger contact with line, lift rod tip slowly to remove last bit of slack. "Feel" for lure or fish. (6) Gently shaking the rod tip with the line nearly tight will make the lure quiver and this can provoke a strike. (7) Pause. Either retrieve and cast again or use lift and drop retrieve.



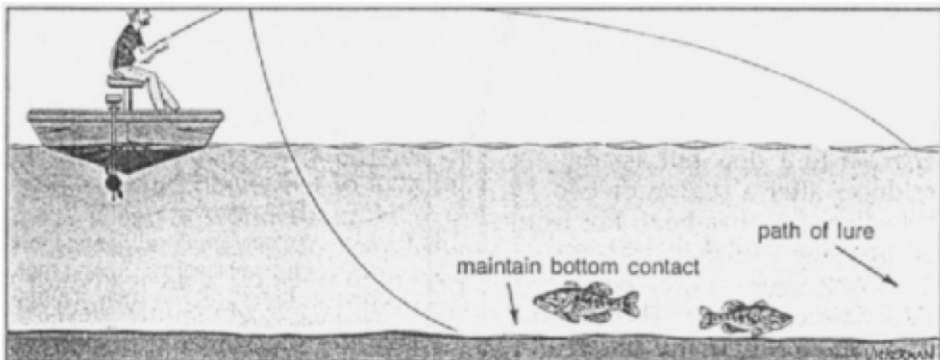
## Line Watching

Watch the line at the point where it enters the water. When any movement is seen—no matter how slight—set the hook.



## Dragging

(1) With rod at 10 o'clock position, S-L-O-W-L-Y move lure with reel—do not lift lure from bottom. Just slide it along. (2) Many times a hit is subtle. Sometimes a slight additional weight or very subtle throbbing sensation are the only clues to a hit. A well developed sense of feel is a must!



gers as nonaggressive fish in clear water. I held out a long time before finally pulling the black worms with chartreuse tails from the top tray. Everything I'd ever learned told me visibility or vibration were necessary in dingy-water situations.

When I purposely deviated from this preconceived idea, I found that it didn't affect my results at all. Please note that this statement is limited to finesse fishing. Similar experiments did prove the value of increased visibility and vibration in dingy water with "power fishing" tactics (crankbaits, spinnerbaits, big worms, etc.).

Besides the worms, there are a bunch of grape 4-inch Ding-A-Ling Lizards; don't think of them as imitating a lizard or salamander, but only as a fat-bodied worm. When I want current to have maximum effect on my lure, the bulkier body of the lizard is just the ticket for drifting the lure naturally to finicky river bass.

## GRUBS

Smoke-colored grubs are one of my favorites and there are about a million Mr. Twister Sassy Grubs and some Mann's Stingray Grubs in my tackle box. Supplementing these are a handful of black Lindy Fuzz-E-Grubs, and some homemade plastic bodies with a longer, fuller marabou tail than the commercially available ones (for when I can't decide whether to throw feathers or plastic). Lastly, you'll find a few Burke spinnerbait trailer split-tailed grubs. These are great fish catchers when used as a grub on a jighead.

Not a big assortment by any means. Actually, the Sassy Grub has proven so productive that I always have it tied on at least one rod. Most lures have a "hot period" when they're new, and then either die completely or taper off to a slow but steady producer after a season or two. Well, this grub has been hot from the first day I tried it, and the bass don't seem to ever get tired of being fooled by it. The grub is the most "conditioning proof"

lure I've ever found, especially in the transparent smoke color. The smoke-colored grub just hints at being something alive, and the fish can mistake it for whatever they're conditioned to feeding on without ever learning to recognize the lure's actual shape.

Smoke grubs are my first choice in cold water when I'm likely to fish with finesse without first looking for more aggressive bass. Even in midsummer, however, grubs remain a viable part of my finesse philosophy.

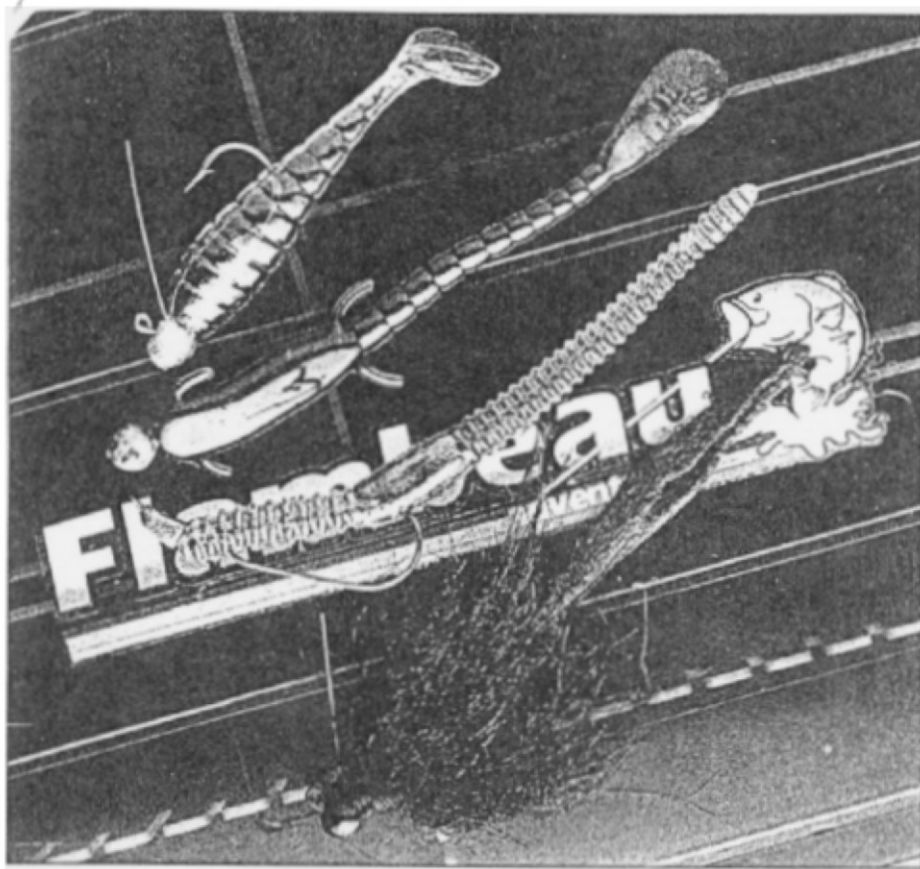
Well, except for a tube of Super Glue needed to attach plastic baits securely to jigheads, don't expect to find anything in my box other than the lures we've just looked at. Too limited? Too boring? Remember, this is only the finesse selection. Crammed into the box are enough spinnerbaits, buzzers, bigger worms, living rubber jigs, crankbaits, twitching plugs, ripping plugs, surface spoons and jigging spoons to use

when the fish are more aggressive. But remember folks, more than half the bass I caught last year fell to top-tray stuff and finesse tactics.

This limited finesse arsenal has proven effective from ice out to ice up, from Canada to Mexico, and from Maine to Arizona. I've yet to find reason to add to it! In fact, I spent a lot of time and effort eliminating marginal items from my lure selection some years ago. If a lure would do a specific job, I didn't need half a dozen different ones to do the same job. My motto: Save the best lures and trash the rest.

As I culled items that rarely saw use or were gimmicked-up duplicates of other items, my catch rate soared rather than suffered! When you've got fewer possible choices, you spend less time staring into the tackle box or tying knots and more time fishing.

When bass are active and ag-



*Rich Zaleski's ultimate finesse lures (top to bottom): Smoke grub on 1/8-oz. wire-guard jighead; 4-inch gray lizard on 1/8-oz. round jighead; 4-inch smoke worm on 1/16-oz. Spider Slider; black pork Twin-Tail on 1/8-oz. wire-guard jighead.*

gressive, a wide variety of presentation factors might trigger a response. But when their mood swings toward indifference, shifting gears all the way and eliminating as many potentially negative triggers as possible will tell me whether or not finesse is the answer. The lures that weren't cut from my finesse selection were those with low visibility and vibration characteristics. When used in finesse situations, the bright colors, high vibration output, and wildly gyrating tails have actually proven less productive than more somber, quieter and less action-oriented variations.

#### **FINE-TUNED LOCATION**

To catch fish consistently with a small selection of "low impact" lures, you've got to put your lure smack-dab in front of the fish. Fail to get the lure close to the fish and you're not going to get bit. This means that you've got to know exactly where to place the

lure and how to control it.

Fortunately, bass actually help with the first part. Most of the time, less aggressive bass are very predictable in their location and position. If efforts with appropriate presentations fail to produce any action, there are two primary possibilities: (1) either the bass aren't in the area, or (2) they aren't interested in expending much energy. If I believe bass are around, I'm confident that I can pick out the positions within the area that passive bass are likely to hold!

Although fishing partners have occasionally marveled at this ability, I make no claim to being the wizard of the fishing world. It's not magic. In fact, locating turned-off fish is not even one of the more difficult aspects of fishing once you know what to look for.

If you're wondering: "How do you know what to look for when every fishing situation is unique?" Well, you could spend thousands of hours fishing slow-moving



finesse-type presentations in every conceivable type of spot until patterns start to develop. Or, you could spend an equal amount of time underwater, observing bass behavior. Then again, you could be lucky enough to learn it from a fishing legend like I did. Then you can skip the hard part and spend those thousands of hours catching bass!

Several years ago, I was fishing a moderately fertile Canadian lake with Al Lindner. At a cabbage-topped offshore hump, I was catching three or four fish to every one that Al put in the boat. But the fish I caught were mostly 12-inch walleyes, while every time Al set the hook, he had a three-pound-plus smallmouth.

"Those cigars sure are active,"

Al remarked as I unhooked what must have been my fifteenth little walleye.

"So how come all you're catching are big smallmouths?" I asked. Luckily, Al was in a generous mood and, not only explained what he was doing, but why.

"Instead of just fishing the weedline and concentrating on the little protrusions like you are, I'm only casting to the tightest inside turns. There are a lot of smalljaws here, but they're in a negative mood, and you've got to put your grub right on top of 'em. Turned-off fish are always more likely to be tucked into a corner somewhere, and every one of these 'jaws have come from a tiny cut or pocket in the weededge."

Just a casual conversation in

the boat, but what may be the single most important piece of fishing information I've ever learned came out of it. In the following years, I practiced that "inside" lesson so tirelessly that I ended up fashioning my whole finesse philosophy around it. The key is *inside turns*—horizontal and vertical. The tighter the crease formed by an inside turn, the more likely that an inactive bass will take up residence. Thanks Al!

When you apply this knowledge, the probable position of turned off, passive bass is predictable. And, once you know where to find 'em, you're well on your way to catching 'em. When a bass is in the state of mind that causes it to tuck tightly into an inside turn, it can easily be intimidated by a lure that exhibits unnatural appearance or behavior. A fish will usually ignore anything that requires a substantial energy expenditure to capture, yet will often respond to a slow moving, natural looking lure right in front of its nose.

The primary positive trigger to employ is proximity. This means putting the lure close enough to the fish, for a long enough period of time for the fish to react. How close is close enough and how long is long enough? Well, it depends on how turned off the fish are. When the fish are active and aggressive, ten feet might be close enough and the time it takes to whiz by at maximum speed could be long enough. Obviously, you can cover a lot of water when that's the case. But covering a lot of water provides nothing but casting practice if the bass aren't



# Where to Find Turned Off Bass

Bass that are most likely to respond to finesse presentations are usually found in tight inside corners and creases—concave structural elements. The use of finesse presentations in these areas is a high-percentage battle plan!

Any lake, river or reservoir has many different types of structural elements that contain corners and creases. In general terms, a cove or bay is concave (inside bend), and a point is convex (outside bend). To effectively use finesse tactics, however, you must think exact position instead of merely general location. Within the general concave shape of a cove, for example, both concave (inside) and convex (outside) turns exist in the contours of the bottom and along edges of cover. Likewise, a point will exhibit both inside and outside turns.

On the lake shown in the accompanying diagram (Figure 1), the general inside turns are highlighted, and these represent good areas to look for inactive bass. But as we'll discover when we examine one of the main structural elements closely, there are many, many more potential finesse positions than the few major areas visible on the map.

**AREA A**—Within the confines of this weedy bay, there are at least half a dozen good inside turns. The cuts in the inside edge of the submerged weeds where the reeds meet them are prime areas. In addition, the crease formed where the weedbed meets the shoreline would be another productive spot. Of course, always check the inside turn along the deep weededge.

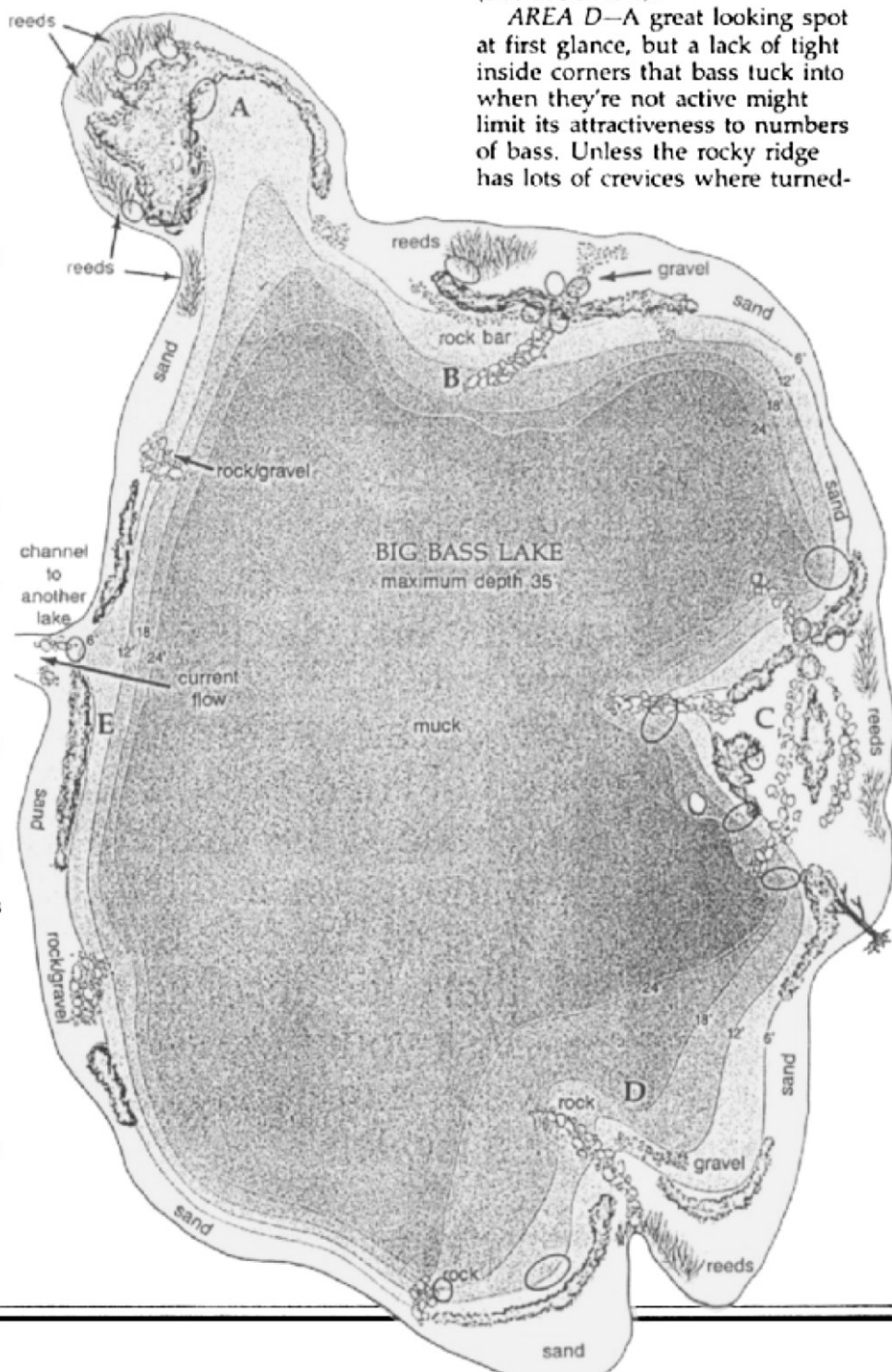
**AREA B**—Depending on the season, this spot might be considered an extension of **AREA A**. Most of the bass that use the bay seasonally could also reside on this bar. The bar probably has a year 'round population due to the available habitat. Besides fishing the obvious general concave configurations at the end of the bar where it intersects the shoreline drop-off, carefully probe the in-

side turns of the corners formed where the rock bar intersects the weedbed. There are four separate and distinct inside turns here!

**AREA C**—This is the most complex area of the lake, and it likely holds the most fish on a year 'round basis. Obvious concave configurations abound, and

even more can be found with some searching. This area is chock-full of prime spots that must be investigated and fished carefully. Be sure to scrutinize all potentially productive areas. Still, an area with many potential positions for holding inactive fish offers the most attractive option on most days when fishing is tough. (See **FIGURE 2**).

**AREA D**—A great looking spot at first glance, but a lack of tight inside corners that bass tuck into when they're not active might limit its attractiveness to numbers of bass. Unless the rocky ridge has lots of crevices where turned-



off fish could drop into, this spot might only be a so-so producer. It would be a poor choice for inactive fish.

**AREA E**—By now you've got the idea. This spot is attractive for a number of reasons, especially the incoming water. On a seasonal basis, the current could draw loads of fish, particularly when they are active. Unless there are lots of tight creases and inside corners, this spot wouldn't support much of a bass population. In fact, I wouldn't fish it under tough conditions! □

## Finessin' Country



Areas are general inside turns in the contour of the point. Such areas will draw some fish under prolonged bright sky conditions. Fish will filter out and concentrate here. Look for tight inside turns in bottom contours and "creases" formed by rock, weeds or wood.

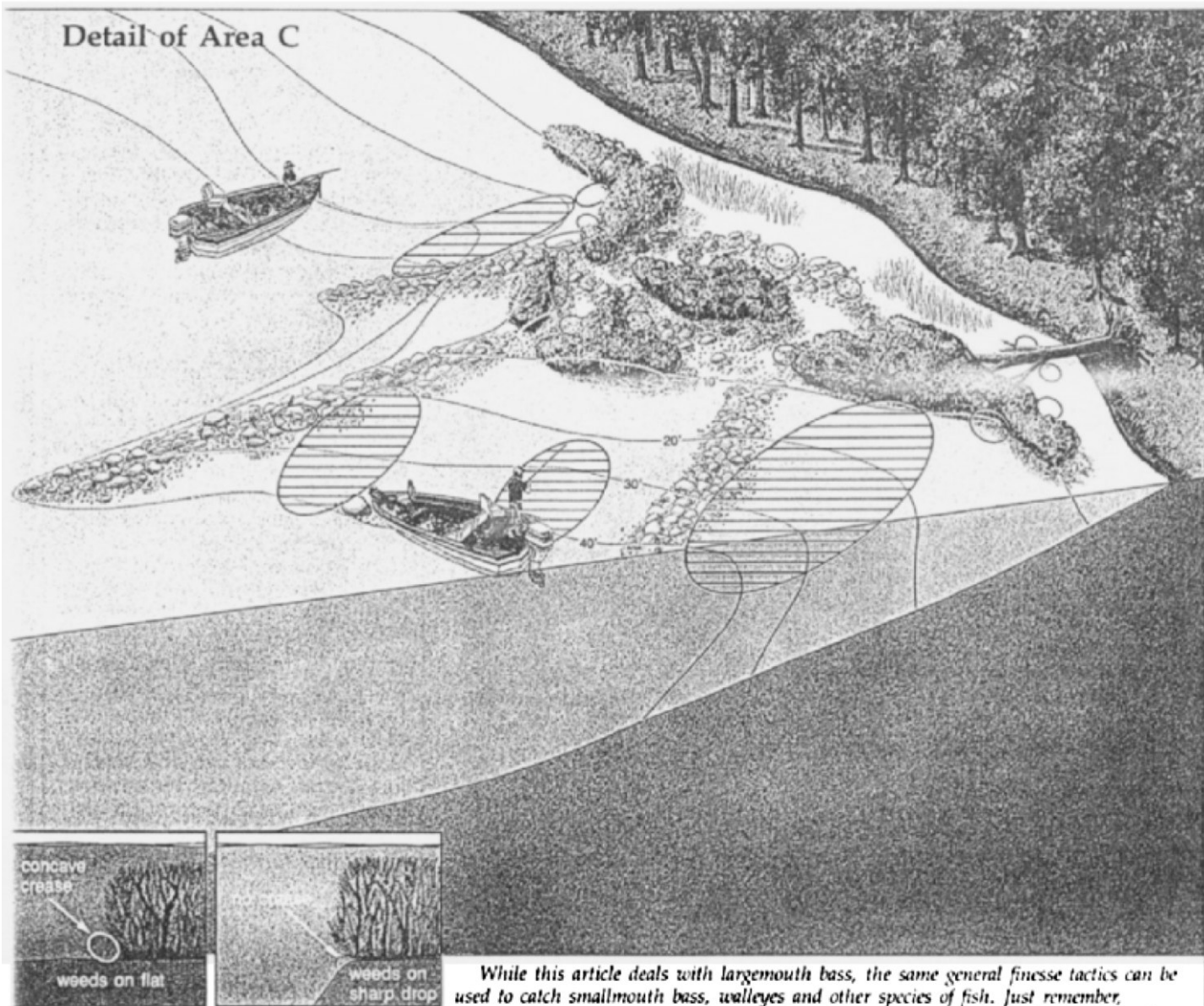


Individual casting targets where a tight inside turn or "crease" is formed in edge of breakline or cover. Fish could be tucked into any of these areas. U-shaped pockets in the weedline and creases formed by rocks and wood are prime attractors.



Areas along the weedline where a wall of weeds exists on a flat. The crease at base of wall can hold inactive fish. Fish can be positioned anywhere along the weed wall and small cuts, pockets and corners are topnotch areas. Where weeds do not end abruptly or no lip extends beyond weedgrowth, this crease doesn't exist.

Detail of Area C



While this article deals with largemouth bass, the same general finesse tactics can be used to catch smallmouth bass, walleyes and other species of fish. Just remember, inactive fish are often cover oriented and tend to concentrate in inside bends. Once the fish are located, use the finessing technique and light tackle to get 'em.

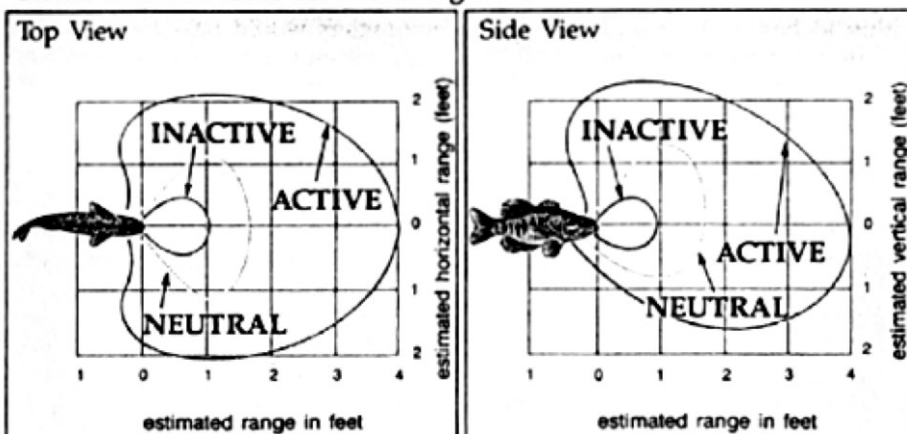


# Strike Windows by Ralph Manns

In front and around the snout of each bass there is a space we call a *strike window*. A bass can be reasonably sure of a successful attack on preyfish (or lures) that move into this window.

The size of the window varies with the activity state of bass. Inactive bass have a tiny window, neutral bass have a larger window, and active bass have an even greater range. To catch a bass, an angler must place a lure within a window, or tempt a bass to move so the lure is in the window. □

## Strike Window Size for Hovering Bass



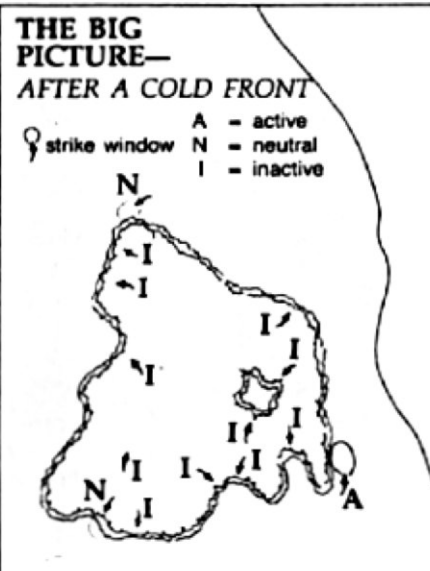
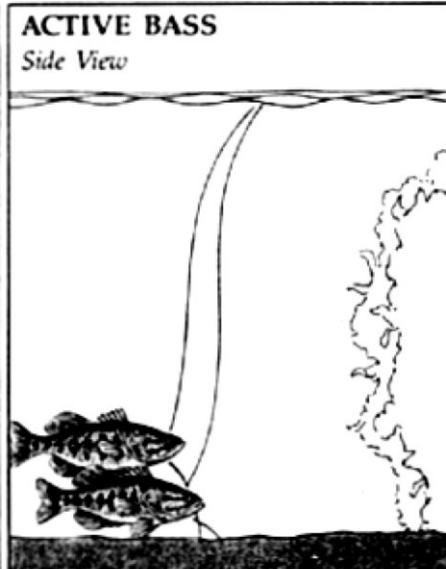
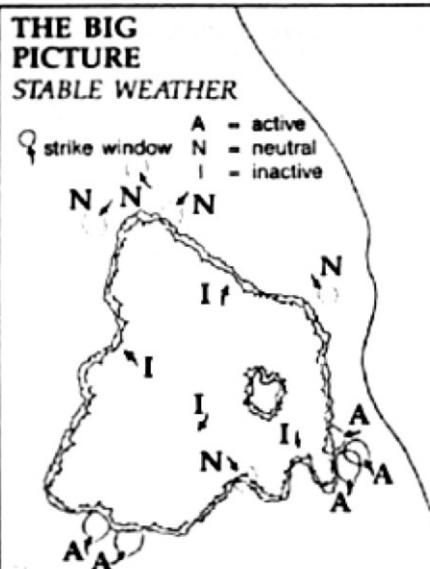
## Strike Windows and Vegetation

Here's one way to use your strike window wisdom. Most good weedbeds will have active, neutral and inactive bass. Usually, there are more inactive and neutral bass than active bass; yet to most anglers, active bass provide the most tempting targets because they tend to strike lures aggressively. However, active bass are also likely to roam, and may be hard to locate and follow unless they are visibly feeding.

The windows of neutral bass make smaller targets, but it's often easier to get a lure into one of them by making repeated casts near obvious points and cuts in the weededges. Inactive bass are usually difficult to pinpoint and offer limited opportunity for a catch.

What happens in the same weedbed after a cold front has passed, the sky is clear and cloudless, and most of the bass are inactive or neutral? Single active bass and single, suspended neutral bass make poor targets. Inactive and neutral bass that have moved into the notched edges of the vegetation provide your best targets. Although their small strike windows are difficult targets, you're likely to get a lure into several windows if you concentrate on casting to the weededge—especially inside bends where they are more likely to congregate.

While bass in a real lake aren't going to be visible, you can make a good guess that such a pattern exists by noting the weather, by observing a lack of surface activity, and by the way bass strike with an almost imperceptible tap on a slowly-worked plastic worm dropped into the edge of vegetation.





reacting positively to your lure. At times, bass are so reluctant to move out of the security of an inside corner that putting the lure within inches of them and leaving it there for more than a minute is the only way to get it close enough for long enough.

### THE INSIDE STORY

Finding inside corners is an exercise in structure interpretation. Visual observation, depth sounder interpretation and feeling your way around the bottom with a jig are your primary means of finding inside corners. You're looking for the concave elements in a structural configuration. A couple super spots are: (1) A point protruding off a weedline forming inside corners where it intersects with the main edge of the vegetation. (2) The base of a wall of weedgrowth forming an inside corner on a vertical plane. (3) The base of the weedgrowth at the back end of a pocket in the weedbed forming a combined vertical and horizontal inside corner.

The same rationale applies to any object or bottom configuration that bass might relate to, be

it a drop-off, stump, bridge piling or whatever. A large stump with a couple exposed roots sticking out one side is a perfect example. Few anglers would pass by such a break without making a cast or two. If there's an aggressive fish using it as an ambush point, running a spinnerbait past the stump might catch him. But if you suspect that a bass is there and the spinnerbait didn't trigger the fish, toss a grub or 4-inch worm into the crevice between the two roots. Then leave it there awhile to tempt a nonaggressive bass. Chances are you'll get bit often.

Analyzing structural configurations that are shallow enough to see is no problem, and fishing these spots is a piece of cake. But you have to apply the same reasoning to deeper spots, as well. By using all the tools and senses available, you can get an idea of what's down there and develop a visual image of the nooks and crannies. Bass make use of these positions when weather, water conditions, fishing pressure or just plain impertinence puts them in a passive mood. The time invested analyzing structures in search of inside turns is time well

spent.

Placing a lure into the recesses of a tight inside corner and working it slowly and naturally can be tedious. Many anglers, particularly bass anglers, feel they have to cover a lot of water as quickly as possible. So they don't use techniques that slow them down. If you fish finesse-type lures "blindly," it's slow going. The secret to success is to develop a sense for locating the inside corners on typical structures. Invest only the time necessary to ensure getting your lure *close enough for long enough* to the right spots, and skip areas in between or fish them with faster presentations. Remember, fish that are most likely to respond to finesse are most likely positioned in the inside corners. Any aggressive fish on the outside sections of a structure are more likely to smack a crankbait or other higher speed presentation.

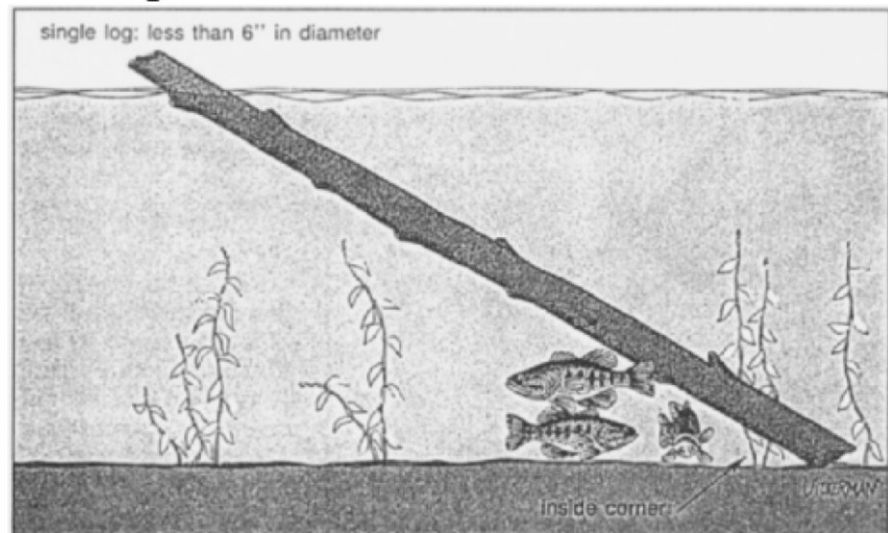
### FINESSIN' TECHNIQUE

Getting a lightweight lure into these inside corners can require some extraordinary efforts. Every jig or worm-fishing article claims you *must* maintain tension on the line to keep the lure under control and to recognize a hit. Every article but this one! When finessing, you rarely let the lure sink on a tight line! What happens when you bring a jig over a bottom obstruction and let it sink on a tight line? It will miss the all important crease at the base of the object because the lure rides the line tension toward you in an arc.

Twenty feet away from your rod tip, an 1/8-ounce jig coming over a 4-foot drop into ten feet of water on a tight line could contact the bottom as far as three feet away from the base of the drop. But if you drop the rod tip and open the bail when the lure clears the top of the object, you can get the same jig within inches of the crease at the base of the obstruction. Sometimes, two or three feet might be close enough, but you'd be surprised how often it isn't.

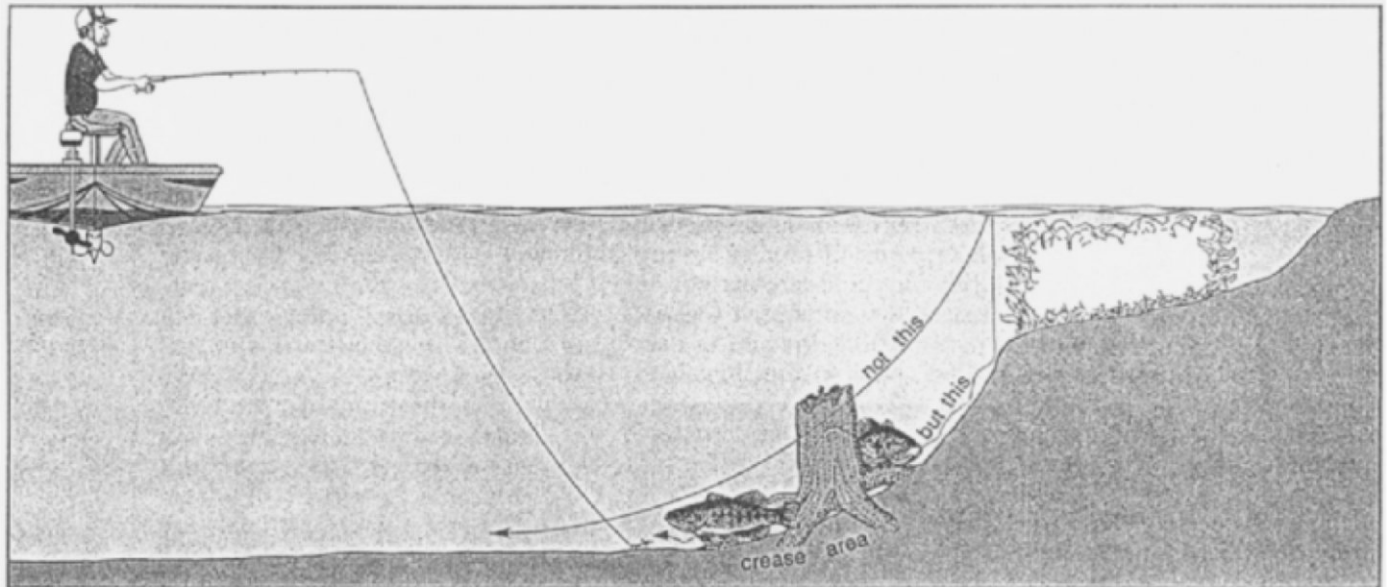
Admittedly, detecting a hit can be more difficult with slack line, but it's not the end of the world.

## How Big Does An Inside Corner Have To Be?



On the second day of the 1985 Evinrude/North American Bass Association Tournament of Champions at Lake George, New York, Rich Zaleski caught all his "weigh-in" fish from the inside corner illustrated; Zaleski was fishing under severe post-frontal conditions, in super-clear water. The limit of 2-pounders he finessed from this log with a 1/4-ounce jig and #101 Pork Frog jumped him from 6th to 1st place; he won a \$20,000 fully-rigged Ranger Boat, to boot!

## Close-enough for Long-enough Bassin'



Note that if the angler keeps the line tight as the lure sinks, it's physically impossible for the lure to drop into the "crease" at the base of breaks where inactive bass may be holding. Actually, line drag in the water would pull the lure even farther from the crease than what's illustrated here. This is a guaranteed no-fish technique. You'll only get bit when bass are aggressive and willing to chase a lure.

Here's the way to get your lure into the bass-holding crease. Lower the rod tip and/or open the bail when your lure clears the top of an object or drops into deeper water. This way, you can put the lure easily within the crease. Remember, develop your sense of feel with properly balanced tackle. Don't forget to keep your finger on the line; it'll double your sensitivity. Set the hook whenever you feel anything through the line or if the line moves. This technique will get you close enough for long enough to trigger inactive bass.

Thin line and the proper rod will help. For most of my finesse fishing, I use quality 6-pound-test line, but don't hesitate to drop down to 4 when using 1/16-ounce lures in more than 10 feet of water.

A sensitive rod is a must in finesse fishing. Choose a high quality, lightweight, one-piece graphite or boron rod that's stiffer than what most fishermen (or rod manufacturers) recommend for light line and lures in the 1/16- to

3/8-ounce range. My finesse rods are built on Fenwick 634 or 692 graphite blanks, with single foot guides and a straight cork handle. Tape a lightweight spinning reel to the handle and you're all set for finessein'.

You can double your sense of feel by maintaining finger contact with the line. If you feel anything through the line while it's slack, set the hook. It's a fish. Of course, line watching detects hits, too. But don't let line watching prevent

you from developing a superior sense of feel with properly balanced tackle and finger contact on the line. It makes sense to take advantage of every edge you can.

Speaking of advantages, finesse fishing can provide a big edge to the tournament fisherman. When tournament bass aren't cooperative, don't hesitate to whip out the light stuff and get after 'em with a finesse presentation. Half the competition won't use light tackle in a tournament, and if the water's dingy or there's cover, the others won't consider it either. Water color doesn't even enter into my decision to use finesse tactics, and I haven't any reservations about tossing a lure into a nasty tangle of branches with 6-pound-test line.

I often fish the light stuff in tourney situations. The three days to a week of heavy pressure that a lake receives during tournament and practice rounds often contribute to an attitude of indifference on the part of the bass. By the time the money's on the line, I'm likely to end up relying on finesse. Sure, I may lose several fish because I can't get 'em out of heavy cover with light line, but I'll land some of them. Odds are good that finessing-tactics will trigger fish that will snub other presentations.

### THE REST OF THE STORY

Sometimes we develop preconceptions. When we catch a fish according to preconceived ideas, the ideas are reinforced; we confuse coincidental occurrence with cause and effect. This may be cynical, but I prefer to prove or disprove the validity of any fishing idea before adopting or disregarding it. Likewise, I would advise all fishermen to adopt the same attitude with regard to any fishing theory, and prove it to themselves. That includes the contents of this article!

Any bass fisherman can improve his overall catch rate by adding a finesse fishing system to his bassin' arsenal. But it's up to you to prove it to yourself. It's more than a matter of just tossing some small worms into the box

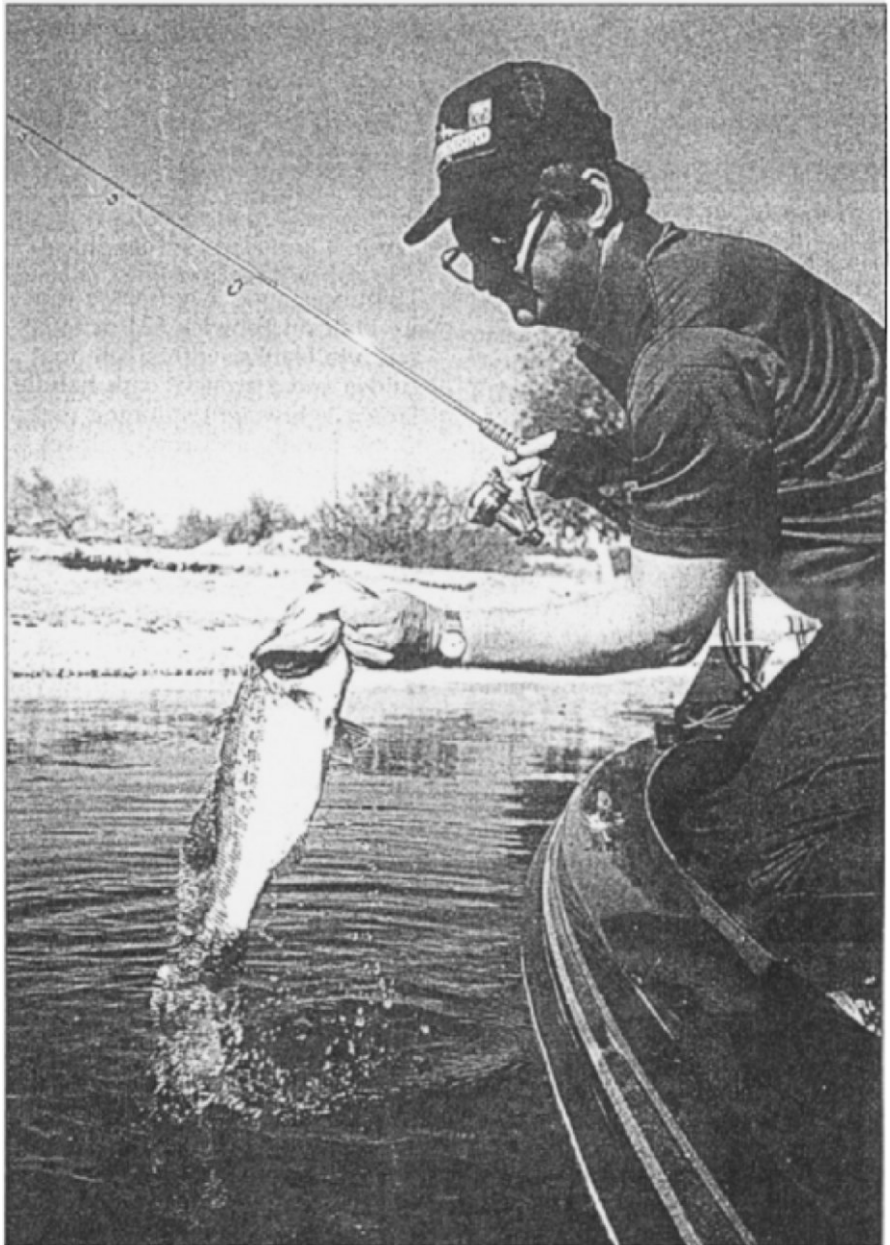
and trying them when the fishing is tough. You've got to develop a "feel" for how aggressive the fish are on any given day, and implement "low impact" presentations to specific spots that passive bass are most likely to occupy.

It doesn't make much sense to waste time with slow and tedious presentations when the bass are turned on and hitting crankbaits or spinnerbaits with abandon. Finesse should be a tool reserved for use in prying fish out of their habitat. Catching bass, after all, is

what it's all about. It makes sense to take advantage of them when they'll smash anything that moves. And it makes just as much sense to take whatever steps are necessary to catch 'em consistently when they're nonaggressive and finicky. Bassin' with finesse is one dynamite system. Try it. ■

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*\*Rich Zaleski of Stevenson, Connecticut, has been an In-Fisherman contributor from the magazine's beginning. He remains one of the most astute "thinkers" in fishing and is a topnotch multi-species angler.*



Clear water, strange lake and tournament pressure often add up to a finesse situation. Pennsylvania bass angler Terry Woginrich hoists a 5-pound bass that hit a smoke Sassy Grub during the practice round of the Redman All American Tournament in Lake Havasu, Arizona.