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## **HOW TO CATCH BASS IN FLORIDA**

by

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How in the world do they catch them? I asked myself the question for years every time I saw a picture of some big, beautiful black bass that the fishing editors of the Tampa papers publish almost daily. Old men, young men, women, children of all ages and sizes, and all of them holding up one or more of those big ones that I dreamed about but never caught.

I did catch some, but all of them either too small to keep, or just big enough to take home. I fished just about all the famous places in West Central Florida where other people caught them, and too many times for my happiness it happened that they would catch them right where I had fished a few minutes before. But I finally had my day. Literally that. One day it was, and it was a good one, so now I know how.

One of the big reasons for my going to Florida several years ago to start a small business there was the stories of fishing, in the lakes, the rivers, the inland sea ways, and the Gulf on one side and the Atlantic on the other. I had never fished or hunted much, for had never lived where much of it was accessible. But I had always wanted to. All my life I had read stories about fishing of all kinds, and I really wanted to do some of it myself. From the very first day of fishing down there, on the salt-water flats near St. Petersburg, I knew this was it. I loved it.

Sea-trout, or weak-fish that are anything but weak, mackerel, mango-snappers, red-snappers, king fish, snook, lots of catfish, and now and then something that I didn't try to name, from out on the Gulf to back up in the lagoons off Tampa Bay or Hillsborough bay. I never caught enough to be the hero in any fishing party, but always did well enough to feel that I was in there doing my share. That is, on salt water I did. On the lakes and rivers, I didn't do so well, in fact, I wasn't on the team at all there.

The first time I tried for bass was on Lake Inverness, where just about everybody catches them, and big ones, too. But I tried plugs, then spinners, and then finally, using live bait, I did catch one that really looked good until I got him out of the water, and I had to throw him back because he was so small. Everybody else in my party got them, on spoons, on plugs, and on live bait, lot of nice big ones. But the only one I could get to hit my line all day was that little one that got sent back to grow up. I tried everything they tried, and in the same places they caught them, and nothing worked

for me.

The next time was up on the Withlacoochee River. When we got there early in the morning I thought there could be no more beautiful place in the world to fish than that. I went there with two good friends, and one of them, Dyoll Shepler, is an expert on just about any kind of fishing in that part of the world. Shep has fished about every lake and stream and about every foot of the Gulf coastline of Florida, and he knows his business. We went from one place to another on the river that day, each one perfect for fishing and for scenery at any normal time, but we had to be satisfied with the scenery, for the fish weren't biting.

The water in the upper river on the Withlacoochee was as clear as a spring, and we could see them lying around down there or swimming lazily about, but the only thing we caught all day was a couple of catfish and some brim that Shep caught on a spoon. He assured me that it was just one of those days when they weren't biting, so I didn't feel too badly or jinxed yet. And besides I got the best of advice all day long on casting and using plugs of various kinds, spinners, live bait and so on. It really was beautiful there on the river, too.

A few weeks later we went to the Homosassa River, Shep, Jeral Williams, and I. And again it was one of those beautiful rivers, just about perfect for fishing. Ad here the fish were biting, for Jeral and Shep, that is. I caught a couple of catfish on live bait. The only thing that kept it from being a pretty sad day for me was Lorraine Day herself, who was on location on a big, beautiful yacht in the middle of the river on one stretch, hooting some scenes from "Cross Winds", I think it was. I waved at her as we went by, and she waved back, at me, I'm sure, though both Shep and Jeral were waving too. But what the heck, they caught the fish.

The next time we went to the Chessahowitzka River, and it was another beautiful but sad day for me. Jeral and Shep caught fish all day, and I practiced casting and cussing. That stream is literally alive with fish. Like the Homosassa and the Withlacoochee, it starts off near the coast by an underground river coming boiling up to the surface in a mammoth spring, and the water is as clear as crystal until it gets down close enough to the coast for the tidal movement to mix up with it an dirty it up with sand and silt. More perfect fishing waters couldn't be found, as both Shep and Jeral proved. But me, I had a lovely ride. For a while they gave me little pep talks to cheer me on, like "Okay, Mel, it's your turn now, so let's see you hook that big one." Or "Hit that spot right over there! That's where he's waiting for you." Etc., etc. But cheering gets painful for the cheerer after a while in a case such as that was, so they finally let me practice my casting in silence.

Can you blame me for thinking I had a jinx on me? Shep assured me I was doing everything right to get them to strike, and man, how I had practiced! I was getting very thoroughly convinced that the place for me to fish was in salt-water, for in between these attempts for bass I had been having a swell time on the Gulf or on the Bay.

Last year when it looked as though my business was all set and really going someplace, and I had begun to dream of going down to the Keys for the fishing down there, or even in dreamier moments of getting out after some of the big ones like sail and marlin, it all blew up in my face like a wet dish-rag. The Army called me back to active duty from my Reserve status. With one thing and another I was able to get deferments until last summer to try to make things a little more secure for my family and get the business set up so it could run without me. It took all the kick out of things for a while, and I didn't do any kind of fishing.

When my time was about to run out, Floyd Long came down to see me from Ocala. Floyd is a native Floridian, a great guy and a great sportsman, and has the time or takes it to do whatever he feels is necessary in the way of fishing or hunting, and he spends quite a bit of time at these two things. He is a building contractor, and his father has a ranch of about eight hundred acres near Williston, north of Ocala. There is plenty of woodland on the ranch, and through the middle of it there is a string of small lakes. When the water is high the lakes are connected, but most of the year they are separated. Floyd was one of the first men I met in Florida, and from the very first he had told me about these lakes and the bass in them. No one ever fished them except his family and an occasional friend, and in his quiet way he claimed that the fishing was pretty good there. For one reason and another I had never gone up there fishing with him, and in the light of my present problems with the Army and the fact that bass just wouldn't strike for me, I wasn't very excited about more bass fishing.

After a couple of drinks with Floyd this time he began to talk about the fishing up there again. The week before he had caught a thirteen-and-a-half-pound black bass, and he said they were really hitting. Thirteen-and-a-half pound! Wow! So about one drink later I had told him again about all my bad luck with bass, and he had promised me a real bass and I had promised him to be up there the following week-end to go fishing with him.

We left his house in Ocala about three-thirty in the morning and just as the sun was beginning to light up the East nicely we were threading our way in Floyd's pick-up down through the woods at the edge of the lakes. It was beautiful there in the grey dawn with the oaks festooned with grey moss. We saw a coon trot across the road, stop to look at us, then go on about his business. We had the boat in the water, our tackle rigged, and were all ready by the time the sun started to come over the horizon. The little lake we were on wasn't much more than two hundred yards across by possibly three hundred yards long, and as the sunlight reached it the grass along its edges began to come to life too, for the bass were beginning to feed. There was popping and sucking and spreading circlets of water everywhere I looked along the lake shore.

While Floyd was circling the boat around to where he said we would start finishing, I tried a couple of practice casts to get the feel of it. About the third time I cast I dropped the plug right where I wanted it just beyond a clump of grass. It sure felt good to be out there, and maybe this time I really

would get one, maybe a fish or two instead of just scenery.

I let the plug settle a little and then began to reel it slowly toward me. It caught a little, and I said, "Oh hell, I've fouled the plug on the bottom." Then, Whamo! It took off across the lake, jerking the reel handle out of my fingers and cracking my knuckles with it as it went tearing along. I grabbed the reel handle again as Floyd yelled, "Tighten him up before he fouls your reel!"

Then he came busting up out of the water, the biggest, most beautiful bass I ever hope to see. When Floyd saw it he yelled, "My God, Mel, you've caught old Granpaw!" And from the way he felt on my line, Granmaw must have been helping the old boy.

Then he came smashing up out of the water again, shaking and twisting like a wild bronco. My line suddenly went slack, and the eddies widened out around where he had gone down again, and free.

I guess I looked a little jerky then, for all Floyd said was, "Too bad, boy" and handed me a cigarette.

After a little while he said, "That sure was a big one. He would have gone way over ten pounds. You know how he got away?"

"Sure" I answered. "He shook the plug out."

"Okay. Next time point your rod down after they strike, keep the tip right on the water or even in the water, and when you feel him coming up to shake, whip him right back down again. If they ever get out where they can shake, these big ones will throw out a plug every time, for their mouth is as big as a barn. But you've got to keep the line tight and the tip of the rod down when you're working them."

"I'll sure try," was the best I could say. I sure felt bad about old Granpaw...

Just about that time Floyd had a strike. I watched him let the fish run with the plug a little, set the hook and bring the tip of the rod down until it was in the water and at right angles to the line to the fish. The nearest the fish got to breaking the surface of the water was to boil it up. Every time he tried to make a break for it, Floyd would whip him right back down again, and that bass sure tried. Then as the fish tried, Floyd reeled him up to the boat and in one continuous, pretty motion, reeled him right out of the water and into the boat before the fish knew what had happened or could flap his tail. He was a beauty. Floyd guessed him at six pounds, and then when he got out his scales, his delayer, it weighed six right on the line.

A few minutes later I cast over toward the center of the lake, and as I worked the plug toward me, again it felt as though I had snagged bottom for a second. As calmly as I could I lowered the tip of my rod, set the hook, and went to work on him. I must have done it right, for you really could feel it when he made a break for the surface, and he never once broke clean of the water, though he did more than boil it as Floyd's had. I didn't try to swing him up into the boat as Floyd had just done, but

I got him in, and he certainly was a pretty thing to see. I had finally done it! Floyd weighed him in at four and a quarter pounds.

A little while later I caught another one, just over two pounds, and Floyd let me keep him after remarking that he was pretty small. He didn't look small to me! I seemed to be handling everything right, and, man, did I feel good. We followed the lake shore around, and that lake was full of hungry bass. I finally got one that topped Floyd's six pounder by a hair, but those were the two biggest for the day. Anything less than about three pounds that we caught Floyd threw back in to row up, as he said. We had plenty without the little ones. Not one of them that hit my plug hard enough for me to set the hooks into him got away after that first one, old Granpaw. I sure wish he had been the second one to strike so that I could have learned on the first...

We stopped fishing about ten that morning when our wives drove down to the lake with coffee and sandwiches. What a morning! I hope I can always break my jinxes that way. No, I think that from here on in I am going to catch bass, that they are going to strike for me, too. You can guess where I'm going on my first leave. And besides, I have a wife and two very lovely children and a going business in Florida, too.

Oh yes! How do you catch bass in Florida? Well, you get him to strike first, then you set the hook, lower your rod until the tip is just about at water level, and then you go to work. Believe me, it worked for me, and if it keeps on working, I'm not buying any other system.

End.