

Lighten up! Catch bass!

Jesse Lomas | June 03 » Area Articles / Queensland / Southern QLD / Gold Coast /

REACTION baits – spinnerbaits, lipless crankbaits, big plastics... they all rely on the instinctive nature of bass to hit them even if the fish aren't hungry. Many tournaments have been won using these techniques. But what happens if they fail? Sometimes bass are just too shy to hit a big, flashy spinnerbait.

Well, one alternative I've been using lately is finessing. Take a BASS tournament, for example, where you have over 100 anglers competing for a spot in the top 10. There are boats whizzing past everywhere and all manner of different lures being used. On a popular stretch of bank or a well-known school, the bass may see hundreds of lures peppered at them over the course of the tournament and the prefish.

But then imagine a bass, hugging the bottom in around 12 feet of water, happily feeding on small shrimp and gudgeons despite the best efforts of scores of spinnerbait anglers. Suddenly, out from all the commotion above the bass sees a small brown object descend from the surface.

The object slowly descends through the water column and finally lays to rest on the muddy bottom, the bass watching with eager anticipation. A familiar sounding 'click click click click' can be heard in the distance, but the bass moves closer to investigate the strange looking grub. Suddenly the grub hops off the bottom and begins jiggling itself away from the bass. Its fins now fully erect and its gill covers flaring, the fish speeds after its escaping prey, and finally lurches forward, engulfing the tiny creature in its huge gob.

But something is wrong – the grub suddenly gains some sort of incredible strength and the bass is soon being dragged away from the comfort of the lake floor and towards the surface. Unable to comprehend what's happening, the bass turns to regain the safety of the cooler depths but the little grub's strength is too great and the fish is soon being scooped up from the surface and placed into a confined space with three of his mates.

FINESSIN'

Finessing bass is nothing new, and while reaction baits are definitely the 'in' thing during the summer months, downgrading to my so-called 'bream gear' has often turned a poor day into a real corker.

Tournament angler Darryl Dimmick has used finesse to great success on Somerset Dam's often fussy fish, and on a weekend where fly was outfishing plastics, Darryl switched to small Carolina-rigged Slider grubs to win a round of the Stessl Family Bass Challenge.

Then, in the first Megabucks competition held at Boondooma Dam, Matthew Mott used small plastics on 1/16oz jigheads when things turned quiet to help him and his partner John Schofield win the second skin of the event.

Finesse is basically fishing light and slow to get a feeding response from fish that otherwise would not be inclined to hit. I'm not sure whether most bass that hit 3/4oz spinnerbaits actually want to eat them, but I know that most of the bass that are caught on small plastics have 'em right down their mouth – and I reckon that's a pretty good indication.

Finesse fishing obviously isn't just about plastics; suspending jerkbaits, small lipless crankbaits, and even topwater could be called finesse. For the purpose of this article, however, I'll focus on plastics.

PLASTICS, PLASTICS AND PLASTICS

Plastics in the 1.5" to 3" range are what we're looking for, and with the explosion in the popularity of bream spinning there is now a great range of plastics in the 2" range that work just dandy on bass.

It's generally best to go with something subtle – that is, something with a fairly discreet action. For example, a big 3" shad probably won't go as well as a 3" fluke or something similar. Atomic 2" Fat Grubs and other small single-tail grubs are great, and are probably the easiest to use. Spider Grubs, flukes, Brush Haws or Hoo Daddys, shads and small paddle tails all have their days in the sun.

A standard 1/16oz jighead with a chemically sharpened #2 or #4 hook will keep you in the zone, and keep the tail of your plastic wiggling while still looking natural. Sometimes upgrading to a 1/8oz head will give you better feel, but in shallow water it may hamper the lure's presentation.

Don't be limited to jigheads; Carolina, drop shot and split shot are also good ways to fish small plastics.

Remember that you are trying to elicit a feeding response from the fish, so natural colours like browns, ambers, greens and grey/pearls will look more lifelike than bright chartreuse or brilliant white. Trying to match the local baitfish is a good idea. For example, in a dam such as Maroon, you might try a brown or grey plastic to match the little firetail gudgeons that frequent the shallows.

While it is common for bass to simply engulf these plastics, it's not uncommon for larger fish to bump and play with soft plastics before

swallowing. In this case, the famed Spike-it scents can turn bumps into strikes into hookups. That means more and bigger fish in the boat, and who doesn't like that!

AREAS

From the shallowest edges through to the deepest thermoclines, there aren't many places where you can't fish finesse. Sending a small grub 35 feet down to a school of Somerset bass can yield excellent results, as can flicking a plastic in a foot of water around a shallow lake margin. Drop-offs, weed edges, breaklines, timbered areas and flats are all good places when the fishing gets tough, and basically anywhere else where you have caught bass before is a great place to 'go light'.

ULTRA SHALLOW

And by 'ultra shallow' I mean two feet or shallower. In dams like Maroon and Clarrie Hall, bass can sometimes come from water as little as six inches deep, and they're great fun when they're in this shallow. If there's food on offer, bass will feed in water barely deep enough to accommodate them. This sort of fishing is pretty fast, in that the hit usually comes shortly after the lure hits the water. For this reason, jighead rigged softies excel because they can be worked easily in the super-shallow stuff and cover plenty of water.

DEEP BANKS

Deep banks are great locations for when the sun gets a little higher and the bass retreat to the cooler depths. These deep banks often provide cover in the form of sunken trees and weed edges, so they are ideal places for bass to hang out.

Obviously, straight retrieves are pretty hard to keep in the zone, so once the plastic has reached the bottom, a hopping or jigging style retrieve should work well. In water up to 12 feet deep, a 1/16oz jighead is still adequate so there's no need to upsize. Try to use 1/8oz only in windy conditions where keeping the bait close to the bottom is an issue.

STRUCTURE

OK – so jighead-rigged plastics aren't exactly great as far as snags go, and you may have trouble stopping a big bass if it's near structure. However, timber and weed edges are fantastic for 'in your face' presentations of soft plastics. There is nothing more natural than a plastic gliding down the face of a weed bank or next to a sunken tree.

If you can put up with the constant attrition of jigheads and the occasional busted leader flapping in the breeze after yet another bust-up, fishing around structure is for you. There's nothing like the feeling of managing to extract a decent bass out of some very evil country on pretty flimsy gear.

DROP-OFFS / BREAK LINES

How many times will you drift over a drop-off or an old creek bed only to see a cluster of bass on the sounder? Bass love to hang off breaklines and, if the wind permits it, a small single-tail on a 1/16oz or 1/8 oz jighead drifted over the edge can often result in a hookup. The trouble with these fish is that they are often suspended, making it hard to target them with lightly weighted plastics. However, if a good presentation can be made, these drop-offs can be very useful fish holders. Because most south-east Queensland dams are dropping in levels at the moment, the fish are starting to really concentrate in these areas.

DEEP WATER / FLATS

Using finesse techniques on deep, schooled fish can be a bit hit-and-miss. If you find a good school there's a reasonable chance of getting some action. If you can't, you might miss out completely. Small plastics aren't great for searching out fish in these areas so it's good to pay close attention to your sounder. If you're lucky enough to have a GPS, mark any schools out once you've located them. There's nothing worse than finding a good school only to lose it and not be able to find it again!

Carolina rigs are great on the deep flats because they can be dragged across the bottom with a heavier weight until a school is found. Once you've located a school, a jighead-rigged plastic or maybe even a drop shot rig can be sent down to the fish.

HOOKING UP

A bass take on a small plastic is usually different from that on a spinnerbait. Getting hit on the drop is a big problem when you think of the slow sink rate of such a small weight. To counter this, as in bream spinning, I use 4-8lb flame green Fireline, and I try not to take my eye off it. Even the slightest quiver on the way down can sometimes mean that a fish has grabbed it, so you have to react accordingly. Bass can be extremely fussy, so light takes need special attention.

But then again, there are those bass with a complete disregard for light line fishing, and will end up smoking you the instant they grab your lure!

Finessing bass is great fun. Sure – it might not always work better than standard techniques, but it's a great tool to have in your bass fishing arsenal. So the next time you go bassin', don't forget your bream gear. And just lighten up!

Facts

Combining tactics

Spinnerbaits are an 'aggressive' lure. They can turn a placid, useles bass really agro if used the right way, and are great for using in conjunction with plastics. If you're fishing a spinnerbait and get hit but don't hook up, try to visualize where the fish has hit the spinnerbait or where it has come from and cast a small plastic in the area. Often the bass will be hyped up from its encounter with the spinnerbait, and grab the plastic.

The same goes for fishing lipless crankbaits and other reaction baits. Harry Watson and Peter Keidge used this spinnerbait/lipless crankbait/soft plastic technique to great success in the Boondooma Dam Megabucks, only using bigger plastics.

- 1) Keen basser Brody Craig took this fish on an unweighted plastic.
- 2) This Clarrie Hall bass fell to a jighead-rigged Brush Hawg.
- 3) A selection of plastics (L – R):
- 4) A Carolina rig was the undoing of this fat Maroon bass.
- 5) This bass fell to a purple Pulse worm dead-sticked amongst some timber.

Images