

Lake Toho
2/28/08 - 3/2/08 -- Lake Toho
Kissimmee Lakefront Park, Kissimmee, FL

Practice

Hooked up with second year touring pro Craig Dowling for practice and sharing the campsite fees; Craig wanted to cover all the lakes in the chain in the next couple of days to get an idea of what kinds of grass and what stages the fish were in. Fish were doing a bit of every thing as far as spawning goes, some done, some on their way up and some actually on the beds or guarding fry. Practice was awesome for learning and preparing me for the tourney, fished every kind of grass in the chain looking for a big fish pattern or concentration of fish for Craig to go on, just never really found anything super special. Paying attention to details and probably bugging my partner to death was well worth it in the end, as I squeaked out a nice little check to start off the season. Here is how it all went down.....

DAY ONE 13lbs11oz

Paired with Lendell Martin Jr. from Texas, Lendell has been around the fishing game for quite some time fishing in the Bassmasters Classic in the past and also guiding on Sam Rayburn. Big Lake Toho was where we would spend our day covering large flats of hydrilla (aquatic grass that is like a fish magnet). Felt very comfortable fishing all day as hard work during practice paid off with a couple of key fish at key times. Craig had found a difference in the depth of the grass the last day practice in one particular area. It was almost like some one took a lawnmower underwater and mowed a giant patch of the grass down the size of a basketball court. What that area held were the edges and subtle depth changes that mean everything when you're fishing in Florida. Fortunately my partner kept us close to that area all day long.

First fish fell victim to a Team Daiwa vibrating bait in the early morning. Kept throwing that thing a little long but it did just bag one over 5lbs. Sometimes you have to realize when a fish was yawning and you threw it right in his mouth, still weighs the same at the end of the day. Spent much of the morning chuckin' vibration (lipless baits) and blades (spinnerbaits and chatterbaits) into the stiff morning wind with limited success; around 11am the wind and the crowd of over 50 boats started to dissipate. Changing to soft plastics was in order and a swimming Senko took 2 fish rather quickly. With the sun higher in the sky and the wind settled down, you were able to see the differences in the clumps and high spots of the grass. Started to flip an Alpha Hawg in bruise color to the visible heavy clumps of hydrilla and immediately started stroking keepers one after another. Wasn't the only one out there doing that but probably the only one with the almighty Alpha Hawg! Very seldom do I think that a certain bait makes that big of a difference but today was one of those days. My partner tried to duplicate

the pattern with other baits but just wasn't getting it done. Culled up 4 times during the day and felt pretty good about my chances heading to the scales.

DAY TWO 9lb14oz

Back to the community hole we were sharing with 50 to 60 other boats just with a different partner. Same weather, same baits not the same results. An adjustment was in order for day two and needed to happen fast. Started to figure out how important that grass edge was around 10am when two fish ate a deadsticked Senko back-to-back. No more bites as we drifted away from the all important depth change. The fish were not responding to reaction baits as the day before. Ground out five more keepers that second day and kept myself in contention to fish the final, big money round. Just one of those days when you have to stay focused and pay attention to details...mentally challenging to say the least.

DAY THREE 6lb0oz

Paired with first place pro Carl Svebeck from AR. They pair the top ten co-anglers with the top ten pros respectively on how they were in the standings. Carl was really a delight to fish with and kept us around fish all day. He was doing something totally different than what I had spent the first two days doing so it was kind of like a breath of fresh air. Cameras chasing us around all day long trying to make a TV program for Fox Network I realized later this circuit is all about. Deciding to go for the homerun and blow this tourney wide open almost ended up costing me ten thousand dollars. Swim baits and 7" Senkos were on the menu till noon but no fish wanted to try the cuisine I was cooking. 12:30pm rolls around and Mr. Svebeck has over twenty keepers to his credit and his partner was on net duty. Zipping up the big baits along with my pride in the tackle bag proved to be the \$20,000.00 decision. Went to work with a wacky rigged 4" Senko on 7lb Sunline and my trustee spinning rod; squeaked out five keepers with the last one coming in dramatic fashion with the helicopter filming directly overhead and two minutes to go. Hope that catch makes the TV program on Fox at the end of the month, it was really exciting. Went to weigh-in at the Silver Spurs Arena in Kissimmee with no idea how it would shake out. Ended up in a tie the last day but was declared the winner due to my previous weights from the prior days of competition.

SUMMARY

Winning always feels great and the money is nice too, but the big picture and remembering the reason I'm doing this again this year was accomplished. My practice partner told me that tournaments are won in practice, not during the tournament. Heard that statement before and thought about it previously but never was it more apparent than this week. I have to thank Craig for opening my eyes to a new kind of hard work during practice. We were on the water 13 hours

straight every day covering water and using different fishing techniques to try and put something together. What I saw and learned from him in three days was more than two years of fishing in Florida on my own. He had me thoroughly prepared for anything I would come across during the derby. Whenever you get a chance to fish with someone that has more on the water experience than you, be wise and seize the opportunity. Every time I get to thinking about how good/fortunate/lucky I've become in the last year, someone shows me just how much there still is to learn. Time well spent paying attention to someone better than you IS going to be the next MASTERCARD commercial.....priceless!