



@ORC

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## The Future Fishes Here

### 10 Year Anniversary of High School Bass Fishing

*By Mike Garthaus, Division of Fisheries*

In 2009, Illinois became the first state in the country to host a statewide high school bass tournament series. The tournament series includes sectional qualifying competitions and a state final, all of which are organized and administered by the Illinois High School Association (IHSA). During that first year, 199 schools participated in the sectional tournaments. In 2018, the number of entrants has grown to 290 schools.

There are 22 sectional tournaments held across Illinois every spring and each includes 10-15 schools. Currently, 49% of sectionals are located in the upper third of the state. This geographic concentration and the large number of participants prove challenging when choosing suitable places to fish. The Division of Fisheries works closely with the IHSA to select appropriately sized lakes within reasonable proximity to participating schools.

Tournament days start around 6 a.m. with boat safety inspections. Following boat inspections, coaches and participants gather for a mandatory safety meeting. Boats are then released to fish based upon a random draw. Each boat must have an adult boat captain to pilot the boat during the tournament. The boat captain can offer advice to the anglers but is not permitted to fish. Each school may bring two boats to the sectional contests. Each boat is restricted to only two student anglers and one adult boat captain. Many of the schools rotate students throughout the day to allow more students to participate.

All youth tournaments are granted a 12-inch minimum length limit and a 5 per day harvest limit, even if the site specific regulation is more restrictive. The small size limit allows anglers a better chance to bring fish back to the weigh-in.



**Mike Garthaus is a fisheries biologist working out of the Gibson City office. Mike obtained his BS and MS in Zoology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Mike worked for the KY Department of Fish and Wildlife before starting his current position in 1999. (Yes, I know this is not a largemouth bass.)**

*@ORC is a weekly publication by the IL Department of Natural Resources Office of Resource Conservation about exciting and wonderful things ORC staff are doing throughout Illinois.*

*Tammy Miller, Editor  
tammy.miller@Illinois.gov*



*Trophy presentation for the 2018 Heart of Illinois Bass Tournament on Evergreen Lake.*

Even if there are more than 2 anglers rotating in the boat during the day, each boat can only weigh up to 5 bass. All boats must be back at the designated boat ramp by the official ending time of the event, which is usually 3 p.m. The local tournament director will make sure each bass brought to the scale is of legal length and then the fish are weighed. The weight of each fish is combined for a total team weight and the winner is based on the highest overall weight. The top three schools in each sectional will qualify for the State tournament and a medal is awarded to the team with the largest bass of the tournament.

The two-day state final is held approximately two weeks after the sectional tournaments. Carlyle Lake has hosted the event all 10 years of the series. 60+ teams participate in the Illinois finals. The state champion team is determined by the overall weight after the two days.



*Boat 1 taking off for the start of the 2018 Lake Bloomington IHSA Sectional.*

Many high schools teams take part in other youth bass fishing competitions outside of the IHSA series. Some of these tournaments are hosted by a school and only schools in the same conference may participate. Other youth fishing events are open to anyone who wants to compete.

The Division of Fisheries started tracking fishing tournaments in 2016. The subsequent data differentiates between youth and adult tournaments. In 2016, 79 youth bass tournaments were held in Illinois, which does not include the IHSA bass tournament series. In 2017, the number of youth bass tournaments increased to 94. So far in 2018, there are 115 youth bass competitions scheduled. In order to increase awareness and youth participation, the Division has created an online youth tournament calendar that invites event directors to post their tournament information.



*2018 IHSA State Bass Tournament Champions, Pinckneyville High School*

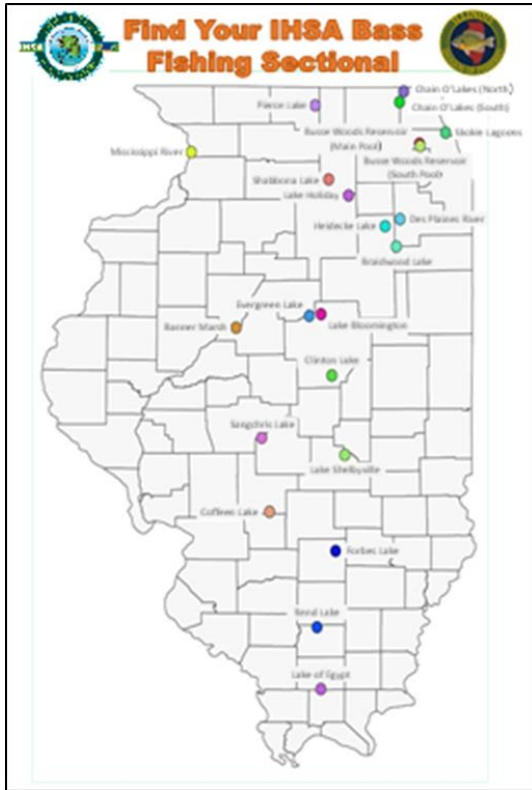
The popularity of high school bass fishing has spread across the country and now there are national high school tournaments. Three of the major professional bass fishing tournament series, Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.), Fishing League Worldwide (FLW), and The Bass Federation (TBF), sponsor high school fishing tournament series.



There are state tournaments that are open only to youth anglers from within the state that compete for a state title while regional and national tournaments include high school anglers from multiple states. Larger interstate competitions can be televised and offer winners college scholarships and prizes as further incentive.



*The winning team weighing in at the 2018 Lake Bloomington IHSA Sectional*



The popularity of youth bass fishing has spread to the college level. Many colleges and universities in Illinois have bass fishing teams. A few schools even offer scholarships for bass fishing, but many of the schools classify bass fishing as an intramural sport or activity and do not provide support. As with high school fishing, the professional bass fishing series also hold college competitions across the country. The high school and college tournament series have web pages, social media, and are televised to highlight their sport, which helps to attract more youth anglers. Although it is business to the national tournament series, they are selling and cultivating interest in fishing to our youth. The increase in the popularity of youth bass fishing tournaments and professional tournaments is making fishing cool. There are unlimited choices for how our youth can spend their time and bass fishing tournaments are now on their radar. The youth tournaments are reaching kids that would have never been part of another sport or whom would never have been exposed to fishing.

The IHSA slogan for the bass tournament series, The Future Fishes Here, explains why high school competitive fishing is important to the Division of Fisheries. Division funding is tied to the sale of fishing licenses and taxes on fishing tackle. It is challenging in today's world to reach our youth and entice them to become lifelong anglers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts national hunter and angler surveys every 5 years and recently released the 2016 survey. It has been reported that increases in fishing license sales in parts of the country might be due to the popularity of youth bass tournaments. There have been no surveys or research to associate high school tournaments and license sales, but it is evident that youth tournaments are getting more kids involved in fishing.



*Illinois State University Bass Team competing at the 2016 Midwest Bassmaster Tournament at Clinton Lake.*

The success and failure of youth tournament fishing is dependent upon experienced adults volunteering to be coaches or boat captains. Since all high school tournaments require an adult to captain the boat, youth tournaments would cease without adults willing to donate their time and money to help kids participate. Historically, members of local fishing clubs have helped to organize the tournaments and provided boats during the tournaments.

There is no doubt that tournament fishing is making fishing cool and has given us another avenue to reach our youth and get them fishing. In celebration, the Division of Fisheries will highlighted the past 10 years of the IHSA tournament series with a display at the Illinois State Fair. We hope to continue our efforts to increase awareness and get more youth fishing.



*Anglers, boat captains, and coaches wait for the safety meeting to begin before an IHSA sectional bass tournament.*

