

A Sport is Born: Kayak Fishing

by Henry Veggian

The tenants of the lake were far-famed for both their quantities and their qualities, and the ice had hardly disappeared, before numberless little boats were launched from the shores, and the lines of the fishermen were dropped into the inmost recesses of its deepest caverns, tempting the unwary animals with every variety of bait that the ingenuity or the art of man had invented.

- James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823)

Carbon clouds bury the mountain peaks as I pass the Oak Ridge exit on Interstate 40 in Tennessee. I'm racing to beat the storm to the Nashville Basin and beyond that, to Kentucky Lake, the largest impoundment east of the Mississippi River. The tempest catches me at Crossville. Lightning in gunfight volleys and rain in Oregon waves. I ride the deluge down to the Cumberland Plateau on the 12-foot long kayak locked to the roof of my 13-foot long car, its hull turned to the sky. We have crossed the Appalachian range on our way to the first National Championship of Kayak Bass Fishing, and not even Daniel Boone's fury could stop us.

Sports enter the world covered in blood and screaming to be fed. Sports that are the love children of already established sports, however, grow up fast. Consider, for example, Mixed Martial Arts or the Biathlon. In America, where we love our boats as much as we love our cars, we adopted the kayak, an old Native American technology, replaced its wood frame and seal skins with rotomolded plastic and materials like Kevlar, and coupled it with fishing. It's not yet a full grown sport, but kayak fishing has plenty of hair on it.

What is kayak fishing? In theory, it is the most ethical and environmentally friendly practice of the art of fishing from a boat. There is no fuel but muscle, no sound but a paddle dripping water (or an angler cursing a lost fish) and no invasive species in the ballast water or stuck to the props. Fish are measured, photographed and released alive in a matter of seconds. In practice, however, the sport has passed along compulsive ancestral traits. Strung out kayak anglers occupy the spectrum between gambling addicts and dehydrated triathletes. And there is the psychological stress, too. Salt water kayak anglers will tell you about sharks longer than the kayak poaching a catch. As consecutive 20 hour long days stacked up at the National Championship, I started seeing things. Specifically, herds of bison. On the last day, I paddled through falling snow looking for one last good fish. At least I think I did.

On the first day of competition, I ran into a middle-aged dad and his teenage son. Both were fishing from kayaks, and the boy had fallen into the cold water from his vessel near the launch. I helped dad beach the kayak and told him I was sorry his day was over before it started. He laughed, paddled across the cove and started fishing. Not to be outdone by dad's commitment, the shivering boy shouted fishing instructions from the open window of the warming truck.

Chad Hoover is the founder and co-owner of Kayak Bass Fishing. He's a big guy, as they say. He stands on stage at the Paris County Fairgrounds with a beer in one hand and a mic in the other, and he can't stop talking about kayak fishing. During competition week, the anglers are required to gather for the Captains Meeting every evening from Wednesday to Sunday, where Chad delivers at least two sermons every night. With the wit and spirit of a tent revival preacher, he makes all topics relevant. Chad praises the integrity of game wardens, evangelizes social media strategies, and delivers fire and brimstone jeremiads explaining all the ways you can cheat, and all the ways that Chad will catch you cheating. On Thursday, after the first day of competition, he uses a fish submitted at 16.34" to get a big laugh from the crowd: "I don't know what kind of math they're teaching up in Kentucky," he says, "but 16.34 inches ain't sixteen and three quarter inches." Later that evening, he delivers a passionate, moving speech about the therapeutic salvation that fishing offers to military veterans. Part Billy Graham, part Larry the Cable Guy, Chad Hoover incarnates the new sport's frenzied spirit.

The congregation on Thursday night numbers several hundred. Senior citizens mingle with disabled veterans, Latinos applaud Asians who reach the podium and women exchange fishing tips with men. If you walk along the fairgrounds hallways, you will note black and white framed photos of prize pigs with old farmers in their Sunday fines. There isn't a single black person in those old photos, but if you look around the hall while Chad speaks you'll see black, white, yellow and brown faces, all asking the same question "What did you get 'em on?" You'll hear Southern accents, West Coast slangs, Midwestern pronunciations and Yankee elocutions because anglers from 30 states have come here to compete for a different prize pig: the Smallmouth, Spotted or Largemouth Bass that will earn them the \$25,000 1st place check.

I'm with the North Carolina delegation. We number about one dozen. Staying at the Paris Landing State Park Inn with my dog, I find the buffet modestly priced, the food delicious and the view of white caps on the lake tricks me into seeing schooling fish crashing bait. The Hmong fishermen from Carolina are also at the Inn, and the rest of the group shares a nearby cabin. Cory Dreyer, founder of CKA tournament series, is among them. There are multiple tournament series in many states, but the CKA is the largest series in North Carolina and one of the largest in the nation. Annual participation is in the hundreds and an average event will count 80 anglers. Each tournament awards points, and these accumulate over the season. In 2015, Kayak Bass Fishing awarded the top 10 CKA anglers qualifying spots for the first National Championship, to be held on Kentucky Lake in March, 2016.

In 2015 I finished in 11th place overall after the final day of CKA competition. But an angler ahead of me had already qualified through a different tournament series, so his ticket fell to me. I didn't know whether to scream with joy or beg for mercy. I spent the fall and winter exercising, studying maps and saving money for a 600 hundred mile drive to a town I'd never visited, on a lake I had never paddled or fished, to compete in an event I wasn't sure existed.

Kentucky Lake is to bass fishing what Detroit is to automobile manufacturing. Covering over 160,000 surface acres, the lake straddles two states (Kentucky and Tennessee). The Tennessee Valley Authority flooded the valley in 1944 as an impoundment of the Tennessee River. In doing so, it also created an assembly line for recreational fishing, a sport that would explode in popularity after World War Two. Companies near and far produce and maintain the gear and boats that populate the private marinas and public launches on its shores. Cabins, campgrounds and bait shops line the roads and lakes (Lake Barkley is next door), feeding anglers, lures and watercraft to the water. It's easy to get lost on or near it. One day I drove to a launch that no longer existed, only to find another that was not marked on any map. Another large fishing tournament, for collegiate anglers, finished when we arrived on Kentucky Lake; hundreds are held throughout the year. One wonders if the local fishing economy might generate as much money as the mighty TVA generates from its dams.

I didn't see the drone or hear it. It's Friday, the end of the second day of competition. I just finished angling in a single-day Open event, a last chance for anglers to qualify for the championship weekend. Leaning against a wall outside the Paris County Fairgrounds, I'm suffering kayak lag, but I'm too tired to worry about how tired I am. When I come to, I see the disc in the sky. My first thoughts are "A flying saucer. They finally found us." My next thought is to wonder if the aliens can spot good fish for us. Or just me.

The drone comes into focus, propellers and all. I am being filmed, by someone for something. This is real, not Memorex. I had signed a waiver releasing my likeness to the event organizers, read dozens of pages of rules, disclaimers, liability forms, instructions for correctly uploading photographs to the tournament site, sponsor info, entry fee receipts, membership regulations, t-shirts. One imagines lawyers behind the scenes, engineers filling out patent applications and advertisers looking to paste logos on billboards. But the event has a different mood, one captured by the KBF Membership letter. Co-owner Joe Haubenreich writes on that form, "if you find a few gaps in our programs and if things change as we go along, it's because we are building this vehicle as we drive it wide open down the interstate."

If you read the kayak fishing industry's propaganda, you might begin to think people are selling their cars and paddling to work. I first took notice of it all when I moved to New York City in 2003. I had been gone for five years, and when I looked out on the Hudson River I saw long shapes. Kayaks, someone said. I wonder now if those people were paddling away from work, or to it. The

evidence is everywhere these days: kayaks in yards, kayaks for rent, kayak clubs, kayak dealers, etc. A house here in Durham has re-purposed an old Jackson kayak as a flower pot in the front yard. Other kayaks are stacked in the yard.

One is tempted to use the “big business” cliché to describe the growing sport. But that’s not true, at least not yet. Some say the rising cost of fuel made owning other boats too expensive for much of the past decade. Some credit the cleanup, regulation and return to health of our inland waters (see Hudson River, above). Anglers will credit innovative engineering of the new kayak designs; others the clever marketing that names kayaks after predators, as in Detroit – Tarpon, Cuda, Thresher, etc. The new kayaks provide comfort, stealth and transit to remote waters. This is how a sport is born: attract a broad range of people, place them in competition and sell them cool stuff.

I go inside and sit with the North Carolina delegation. We placed several anglers in the money at the Open event, including yours truly (again, I finished last in the top spots). Several more of us will finish in the money during the National Championship that begins the next morning. Right now, it isn’t the money that matters, or the adrenalin of victory, or the thrill of being part of a sport just as it becomes a national event. All that matters is that we are exhausted, a cold front is coming and we have to figure what the fish will do as we try to find meals and a few hours to sleep.

Chad is onstage again, requesting feedback about today’s event. I’m requested backstage to have judges verify my photos. Large flat screen TV’s serve as monitors, paperwork and cases of water are stacked on tables. I fill out an IRS form. The big fake checks wait in another room, where a photographer will meet us. A laser printer quietly pumps out the real checks. I can see the total cash prize figures on the monitors, and my jaw drops. There is camaraderie in the chaos, and lots of cash. Later, as my name is called to join the winner’s circle, I nearly knock over a lighting rig.

Pioneers eventually settle, of course. A sport will become a business, if it’s lucky to last that long, and competitors will become clients. But it doesn’t feel that way, not just yet.

I drive back to the hotel and wave to Andrew, the night watch from Philly, as I crawl past the desk. It’s almost midnight and I have yet to prepare gear. I wake up at 4 a.m. in yesterday’s clothes, the TV still on. I eat a quick breakfast, feed Zeus the dog and walk him to the bluff that overlooks Kentucky Lake outside. There is a blue glow in the eastern sky. Engines fire up and I turn to watch the column of Carolina anglers leave the cabin across the cove. I will drive soon, too, 40 miles and north, passing real deer and imaginary bison, to reach my launch. The championship begins. Before it is over we will paddle through rain, wind and snow toward something that is coming into the world, looking an awful lot like us.

© 2016 (See note below)

Note: This article originally appeared in a spring 2016 issue of *Pacific Standard* magazine. It was commissioned by then editor Ted Scheinman for an article series entitled “Economy of Scales,” which was devoted to American fish, fishing and fisheries. *Pacific Standard* no longer exists; the original article was posted to this link: <https://psmag.com/kayak-bass-fishing-birth-of-a-sport-1f82bd804768#.b98r81sy8>