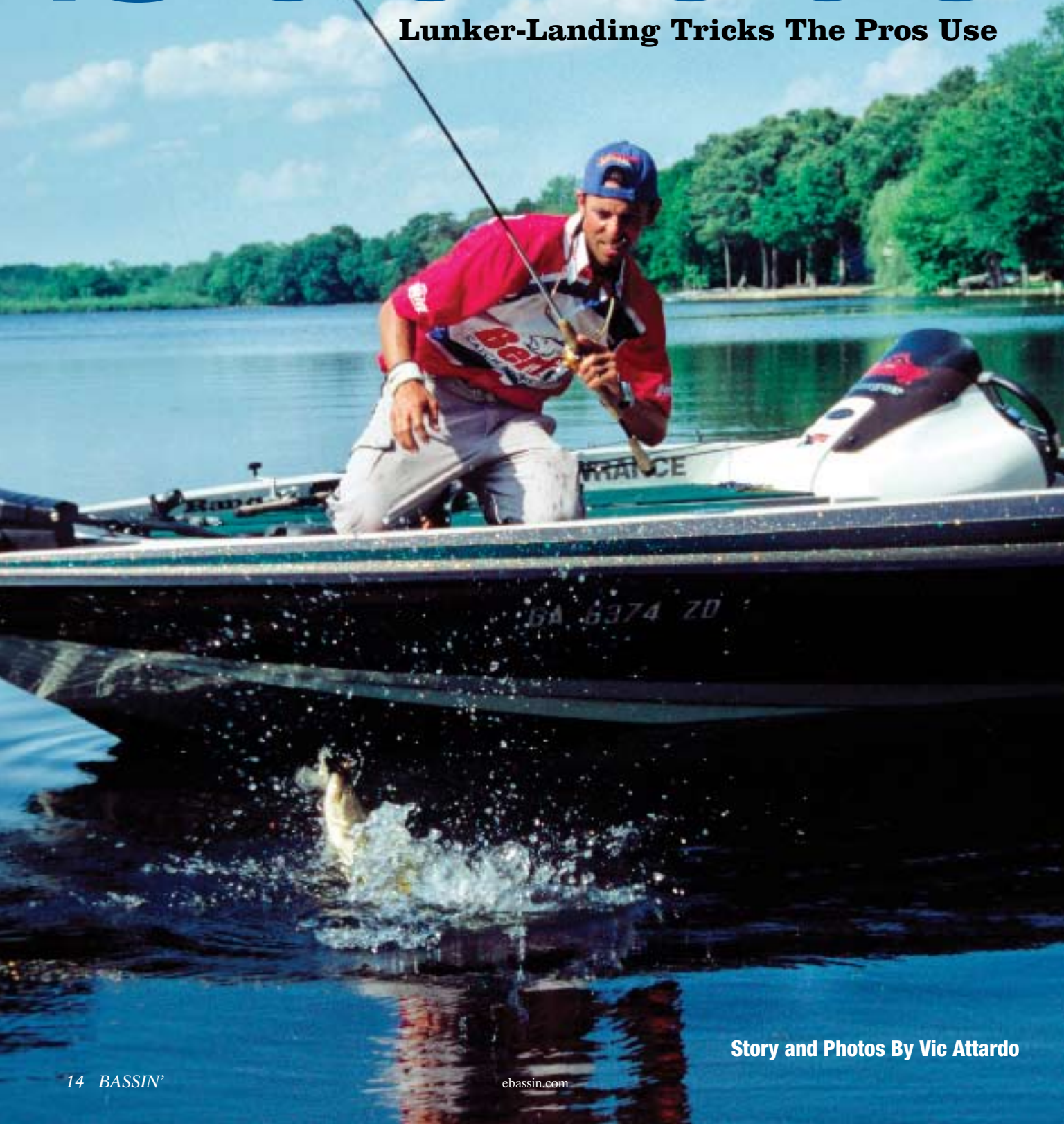


Trophy Bass Secrets

Lunker-Landing Tricks The Pros Use



Story and Photos By Vic Attardo

In any fishing, there is always the element of luck. But when it comes to finding and catching big bass — the kind of bass that win tournaments and woo the crowd when hoisted on high — the pros like to reduce the vagrancies of chance and introduce their profound skills to the equation. In other words, they chase big bass with purpose and intent.

“The thing about big bass is that you have to first decide to go after them,” said 2006 Bassmaster Angler of the Year Mike Iaconelli. “Basically, you have two scenarios. The first is to go to a place and figure out how to catch numbers, which are probably smaller fish. Or you can go to a place and figure out how to catch big fish, and that usually means fewer bites. I like fishing for big bass, so that’s the thing I usually decide.”

Iaconelli, the 2003 Bassmaster Classic winner, says the mental decision is his first important step to catching big bass. The next is the process of getting a bite.

“When I get to a fishery and I’m thinking big fish, there are two things that come to mind,” he said. “The first is available forage and the next is water depth.”

Over the years, Iaconelli has noticed that bigger fish always relate to an area in a lake that has access to deep water.

“Beside the spawn, and the spawn

is its own period because the fish are thinking about going to beds, almost all the bigger fish I’ve caught have come from an area where there is significantly deeper water close by,” he said. “But you know, the thing about that is that deeper water is relative.”

Iaconelli illustrated his point while working a profoundly shallow lake in southern New Jersey. For acres and acres, the water was only 2½ feet deep, clear and full of stumps.

“But right here,” Iaconelli said as he let loose a long cast, “there is a little creek channel that is about 3½ feet, and that’s deep for this lake. That’s what I mean when I say deep water is relative.”

Using polarized glasses, Iaconelli was able to define the slightly deeper and narrow creek channel, and he was putting casts across and through the serpentine course.

“An ideal scenario is to find places where deep-water access is more limited,” he said. “Right here, this old creek channel cuts through the middle of this flat, and I’m in it. In this case, you have hundreds of yards of flat bottom, and all of a sudden there is one little area where it dips down and comes back up. This is the kind of area I look for when hunting big bass because it’s a funneling area — it’s

funneling those bigger fish into specific places. Anytime I can maximize that opportunity, instead of just randomly casting, I have a better chance at finding the bigger fish. It’s not that I can’t go up on the flat and catch a big fish, but if I am hunting big fish, I will look for those specific spots.”

Almost on cue, a significant swirl appeared on the water. We’d seen other flushes, but this one spread some wide rings. It also came from a spot Iaconelli had earlier pointed out as the creek channel meeting the stump flat. Reacting like a magnet, he cast toward the flush.

“The second thing I’ve noticed about big bass concerns forage,” Iaconelli continued. “I think the unmistakable thing is that big bass prey and feed off bigger forage. We see that all the time in these cedar lakes in Jersey. A big fish knows instinctively that it shouldn’t expend energy on smaller bait. Instead, he’s looking for a big crayfish, big yellow perch, bluegill or shad. For me, I try to imitate that big forage. Certainly, I’ve caught plenty of big fish on smaller baits, but if I’m hunting for big fish, I want to maximize my opportunity with a bigger bait.”

Once Iaconelli has made his decision to pursue bigger bass, identified the forage and located depth breaks, he needs to tie something on his line to hook the bigger fish.

“I’ve got two baits that are my favorites for bigger fish,” he says. “The first one — and you’ll probably get this from 90 percent of the people you ask — is the jig. I think big fish instinctively know that a big crayfish — one that is 3 to 4 inches long — is an amazing meal for the energy expended. If that big bass hunts down a 4-inch crayfish, that’s a good deal for him. You can’t do much better imitating a big crayfish than with a jig, so a jig is my No. 1 bait for big fish. In fact, if I had to limit myself to one bait for big bass, it would be a jig.”

Of course, even with a jig, the devil is in the details, and as we all know, Iaconelli can be a little devilish.

“I’m very conscious of the jig color I use,” he said. “I like to look at the color of the natural crayfish. Are they brown or orange? So when I pick a jig, I’m trying to match the size and color to the prevalent natural forage. Also, I like to use trailers that really mimic the pinchers. I use a lot of chunk trailers, like the Berkley Gulp! Chunk, and I actually split the legs on it a little bit to make it flare out.”

However, even big bass need a little

Iaconelli’s Tilapia Pattern

In his recent “Angler of the Year” run, Mike Iaconelli had a number of opportunities to put his big-bass ideas into practice.

“The first few tournaments of the year, we were specifically around places where there were bigger fish,” he noted. “During the second and third day of the event on Lake Amistad, I had built small limits. Small is 17 and 18 pounds, which isn’t really small. However, I got to the point where I was catching the same size fish, so I went out and specifically targeted bigger fish. I put away what I was using and picked up a jig, a ¾-ounce Mann’s Stone Jig. But instead of imitating a crayfish, I started

crashing it atop the flooded trees to imitate the tilapia, which is what a lot of those big fish feed on.”

The bass apparently took notice of Iaconelli’s jig crashing.

“In a lot of places, anglers don’t know about tilapia, but they are a big-bass prey,” he says. “What I was doing was throwing the jig into the treetops because the water had flooded the treetops. I would literally throw the jig past the trees and bring it back, swimming and crashing it through the branches. On the second part of each day, I was able to increase my limit from 17 and 18 pounds up to 25, getting those fewer but bigger bites.” — Vic Attardo

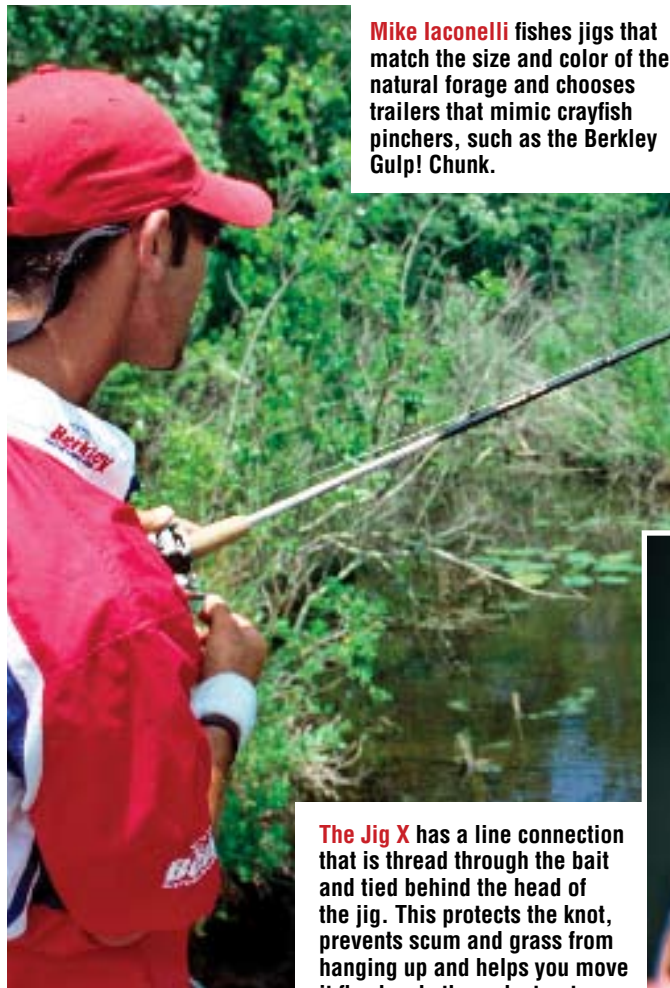
variety, and Iaconelli is willing to supply them with another offering.

“My second bait for big bass — and it’s a close second — would be this deal right here,” he said, making another cast with a

whirling buzzbait.

We were after big Jersey bass, and Iaconelli was practicing what he preached.

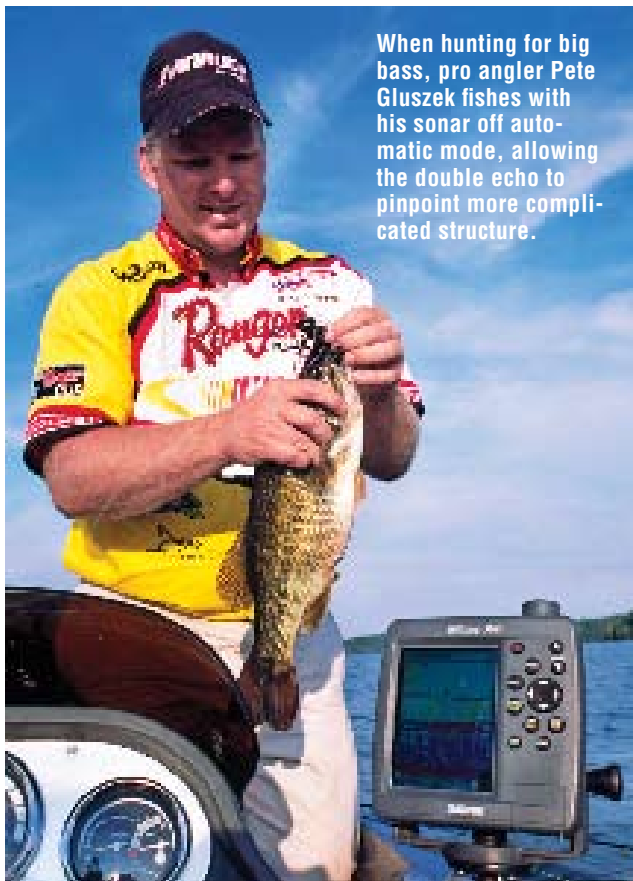
“If you think about a buzzbait as a topwater, it’s a topwater that has an ex-



Mike Iaconelli fishes jigs that match the size and color of the natural forage and chooses trailers that mimic crayfish pinchers, such as the Berkley Gulp! Chunk.

The Jig X has a line connection that is thread through the bait and tied behind the head of the jig. This protects the knot, prevents scum and grass from hanging up and helps you move it flawlessly through structure.





When hunting for big bass, pro angler Pete Gluszek fishes with his sonar off automatic mode, allowing the double echo to pinpoint more complicated structure.

tremely big profile, and it imitates something that is big and dying,” he said. “Besides a jig, I’ve caught more big fish on a buzzbait than anything else. Again, the thing about it is that I’m not getting 10 million bites. It’s not like I’m throwing a finesse worm and I’m going to get mucho strikes and only one is big. When I’m throwing the buzzbait, my mind-set is that I may only get three or four bites a day, but they are going to be giants.”

And the devilish details on buzzbaits?

“When selecting a buzzbait, I’m trying to think about the same thing I do with a jig,” Iaconelli explained. “First, I’m picking color. I’m thinking about the forage and trying to imitate the forage.

If it’s shad, I go with white. If it’s bluegill, I usually go with chartreuse. Also, I’m thinking about light conditions. In general, the brighter the day, the lighter the buzzbait color. The darker the day, the darker the buzzbait color.”

Finding Complex Structure

With his recent victory in the FLW Stren Series on Lake Champlain in September coming on the heels of being the 2004 Bassmaster Northern Open champion, Pete Gluszek is padding his resume with titles and big bass. In the hunt for big fish, Gluszek, like his friend Iaconelli, also shows purpose and intent.

“There are a couple of things I do that will help me encounter big fish,” Gluszek said. “First thing is I’m looking for the type of structure that is the most complicated, which is usually where the most successful and biggest predators are going to live.”

As an example of “complicated” structure, Gluszek picked one from his recent triumph — the largemouth and small-mouth factory called Lake Champlain.

“On Champlain, location and depth were critical in finding big fish,” Gluszek said. “The fish were in a transition phase — going from their summer haunts, which

are shallow, grassy flats, to their wintering areas, which are deeper but consist more of rock and wood cover.”

Gluszek said that while smaller fish remained on the old grass, big bass left the vegetation once it started to die.

“The key to getting those bigger fish was being ahead of the movement,” he noted. “On Champlain, I moved off to the breaklines that were in 5 to 15 feet of water, and I looked for the most complicated structure. I won the tournament on some of the most complicated structure that exists in that depth zone for largemouth — a combination of wood and rockpiles.”

As anyone who fishes Champlain knows, the lake is as much a rock factory as a fish factory. Gluszek’s complicated structure was more than isolated rockpiles. It was rocky places on the edge of grass that also contained laydown trees. This structure congregated large bass off the edge of dying grass beds.

Of course, this complicated structure was not easy to find.

“I used my Garmin electronics to find the hard spots,” Gluszek noted. “You have to be looking for that double echo on your sonar because it’s critical to be able to iso-

late those hard spots and wood among the sand and mud bottom. Those hard spots are where the fish will be.”

While using sonar to find schools of baitfish is commonplace, Gluszek adjusts his screen over shallow water to locate big-bass structure others might not see.

“A lot of guys miss that on their sonar because they have it on the automatic mode, which won’t allow you to see the double echo,” he said. “You have to increase your range to find the good stuff. Say you’re in 10 feet of water. You have to increase the range of your sonar down to 20 feet. That way a double echo will show up on your screen and you can see the structure in detail. So one way to hunt for big bass is to adjust your sonar. Look for those deeper, more complicated areas. They are great ways to hunt for bigger fish.”

Like Iaconelli, Gluszek says his No. 1 big-bass bait is a jig. He used what he termed “an ultra weedless bait,” the Jig X, to win at Champlain. Made by Vertical Lures Inc., the Jig X has a line connection that is thread through the bait and is actually tied behind the head of the jig.

“This takes the knot out of the equation,” Gluszek noted. “The design helps

protect the knot and also prevents scum and grass from hanging up. When you’re dealing with complicated structure, having the knot behind the jighead helps you move it flawlessly through the structure.”

In the hunt for big bass, these top pros demonstrate that it not only takes some luck but also requires determination, skill and an attention to detail. Only then do they catch the bass that win tournaments and woo crowds. 🎣

Manufacturers

Berkley
1-800-237-5539
www.berkley-fishing.com

Garmin Electronics
1-800-800-1020
www.garmin.com

Mann’s Bait Company
(334) 687-5716
www.mannsbait.com

Vertical Lures
1-877-318-1142
www.verticallures.com