Smallmouth bass elusive, but persistence pays off

By STEVE POLLICK BLADE OUTDOORS EDITOR

hen it comes to smallmouth bass fishing in Lake Erie this summer, persistence pays off, at least a little, and Bowling Green angler John Harkness is proof.

On a recent foray into the Bass Islands region with the Rock Doctor, guide Jerry Abele, Harkness alone stuck with casting and dragging olive tube-jigs, this long after the rest of the party had forsaken

them for walleye rigs. The day was billed by his buddy and ringleader, Tim Ayer, of Grand Rapids, as a smallmouth trip and Harkness aimed to make it so.

Which is why he alone produced a 3-1/2-pound smallie worth seeing at any year, but especially this one, when Erie

smallmouth action has been nothing to write home about. Earlier he lost a similar size fish. He was the bass master for the day

As the crew gathered at dawn at Channel Grove Marina near Lakeside, Abele offered the day's options, acknowledging that walleye have been more consistent producers than bass around the islands' rocks and reefs. Even the Pelee Island area on the Canadian side has not been as productive as in years past.

"There's a big hole in the bass population," said Abele, a veteran known for his years of "rock-picking" experience. Others in the crew included Greg Carson, of Grand Rapids, Eric "Itch" Evans, of Grand Rapids, Ernie Tebeau, of Gibsonburg, and yours truly.

It was telling when Abele

suggested trying a variety of tactics, and when most of the guys went with bass gear — live softcraws or tubes — he imme-diately started with a Weapon, a hybrid mayfly rig baited with a piece of nightcrawler. It has become a now-favorite walleye rig in the western basin. He immediately started catching walleyes on a gold-blade homemade Weapon as we

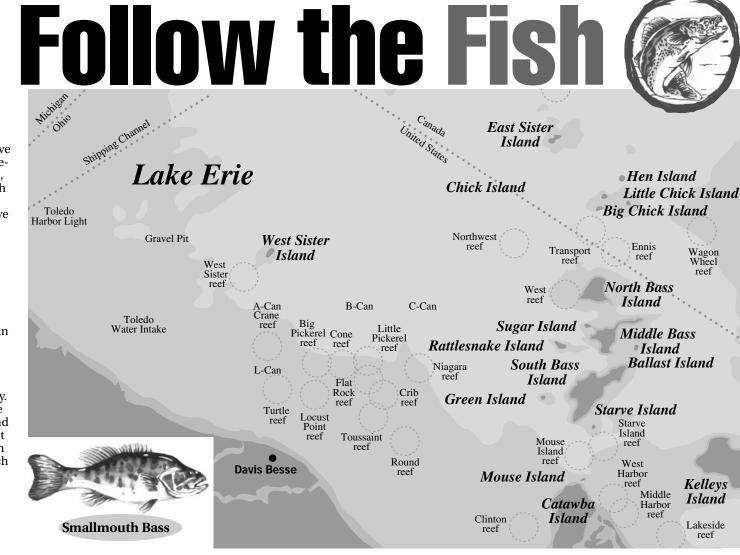
drifted over Kelleys Shoal. The wind directions were squirrelly this day, up and down, switching around the

compass, and an approaching cold front was taking its time arriving. So the fish were finicky. Nonetheless we managed to land half a boat-limit of 'eyes, most in the 15 to 18-inch range, not to mention as many sheepshead, or freshwater drum, as we wanted to play with. And about a

Angler Annie Orth displays a fine smallmouth million and three

gobies. Gobies. Abele could turn them - and double-crested cormorants, those explosively abundant, dark-feathered flying fish-eaters — into four-letter words. This invasive exotic species of forage fish has become an unconscionable pest in the lake. The exponential expansion perhaps has been fueled by the explosion of two other pests, zebra and quagga mussels, which are a favorite goby food back where they both came from. So much for so-called federal control of polluted ballast-water from overseas shipping, the source blamed for mussels and gobies.

In any case, Abele agrees that little can be done with gobies, other than to tolerate them and hope their numbers eventually level off. But they are bait-thieves extraordinaire, not to mention vacuum clean-



ers when it comes to emptying bass nests of untended eggs

during spawning. All of which is not to say that smallmouth cannot be caught. It is just that for the foreseeable future, the days of catching and releasing 50 to 100 bass are over, Abele noted.

But one fisherman we met at day's end showed us a fine catch of bass he had taken on softcraws "up in Canada." At least

two of them The round goby, above, is a were fivebait-stealing pest in Lake Erie. pounders and the rest hefty. Unfortu-

nately they all were dead in his cooler, headed for a fish-cleaning station. The guy must have been starving, unable to keep up payments on the shiny new luxury sedan he was driving. Some fishermen just don't

get it, it seems. If you kill all the big old bass, which take years to grow to five pounds or better, there will be precious few left to share. Supposedly most of us practice catch and release with bass.

On a

brighter note, area angler Dan Tucker sends news that the future may be brighter for Erie smallies, if conservation is widely practiced.

"We have been catching

an unbelieveable amount of young smallmouth bass around the reefs and rockpiles while fishing for [yellow] perch with minnows. We caught at least 150 or more of them over

a five-day period, trying to locate some larger perch.

These little beauties are running from three to six inches and are very healthy and stocky. They are very lively and spunky, and it does your heart good just to see that there has been a large successful hatch, despite the large population of predators."

Tucker, who has been fishing with guide Jerry Meyers Sr., rightly urges fellow anglers, who may be perching this fall and incidentally catching these young bass, to return them to the water unhurt and to keep their time out of water to a minimum.

Maybe some day we can return to the fantastic smallmouth bass fishing, like it used to be."

Notice to readers: This will be the last installment of the Follow the Fish feature for the season. It is scheduled to resume next spring. In its place Steve Pollick's Outdoors column will appears Fridays in the Sports Section, in addition to Tuesdays and Sundays.

Middle

Harbon

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Island

Contact Steve Pollick at: spollick@theblade.com or 419-724-6068



John Harkness, of Bowling Green, and his Erie prize.

AUTO RACING



Wagon Wheel

reef

Kelleys

Island

Lakeside

reef

Glass City 200 is best of Fisher takes stock of her futu season-ending specials ASSOCIATED PRESS

By C.J. LANDRY

BLADE SPORTS WRITER As the 2005 short track racing

season draws to a close, many tracks are holding season-ending specials. One of the top events for super

late models in the Midwest will be the Budweiser/NBC 24 Glass City 200 presented by the Great Lakes Chevy Dealers set for Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 24-25 at Toledo Speedway.

One of the first entrants in this year's Glass City 200 is defending race winner Steve Sauve of Saginaw, Mich. Sauve is looking to become the only four-time winner of the fall classic.

Other early entries include: Jack Landis who captured last month's Summer Sizzler at New Paris, Ind.; Lee Anderson who won the Kalamazoo Klash in July; John Grega has a Main Event win on his resume; Ron Allen who has made a great comeback from a crash at Toledo in May and is a former Toledo champion, as is Joe Hawes; Dave Kuhlman is a four-time Flat Rock king and a threat at Toledo for any event; and Brent Jack who scored his first two wins at Toledo this season, including the Season Championship event.

The \$70,000 race weekend begins next Saturday with the National City Bank "Pole Night," as the late models go for the \$500 Kayo Lumber Fast Time Award.

The late models will qualify, run a pair of last-chance races and have their final warmup session.

The ARCA sportsman, factory stocks and figure 8's will compete in feature events. It's also Scout Night and Racing Fan Club Night. The pits will open at 9 a.m. followed by practice at noon, time trials at 4 and racing at 6.

On Sunday, Sept. 25 the pits will open at 9 a.m., with the front gates opening at 10:30.

An autograph session is slated for noon, with a 30-lap B Main race for the late models set for 1 p.m. The 200 will follow the B Main.

An advance-only two-day ticket is available for just \$25, a \$10 savings per ticket, and may be purchased by calling the track at 419-727-1100.

Because of recent accidents that



have injured their sons, Doug and Randy, Fremont Speedway promot-ers Jim and Joanne Ford have canceled the remaining races for 2005.

Anyone holding rain checks for the 2005 season should send the rain check with their address to Fremont Speedway, 19101 Orchard Drive, Elmore, Ohio 43416, and a refund check will be sent.

Winning the 2005 410 winged sprint car title, Mike Linder joins his father Jim to become the first fatherson track champions at Fremont Speedway. Jim has seven super modified/sprint titles at Fremont.

Paul Weaver is the 305 sprint track champion, while Bobby Davis edges the track's 2001, 2002 and 2004 champion Steve Sabo by six points for the 2005 Coors Light Dirt Truck title.

From April through October, Brandon Martin's 48-foot trailer houses the 1,300-pound, 850-horsepower sprint car that Martin, 22, of Attica, Ohio, races on dirt tracks across the Midwest.

However, when Martin saw the destruction of hurricane Katrina that struck the Gulf Coast nearly three weeks ago, he knew he had to use his blessings to help others.

"When I saw everything on the news ... how those people had nothing left, I thought it would be nice to load up the trailer and go help," said Martin.

"At that time we were gearing up to go racing in Indiana, so I kind of blocked it out of my mind. But when we got home, my parents, my girl friend and I started talking about doing something and we met with all the guys on the team and they agreed we would go help."

The idea is to load up the race hauler with supplies and transport them to Pass Christian, Miss., a town of 7,000.

"There's no public buildings left there ... it's right on the coast [west of Biloxi and east of New Orleans]. We heard that 95 percent of the town's buildings were destroyed," said Martin.

"We checked it out, and they have a race track near there. So we're hoping to make this one racadded Martin, who finished eighth in the point standings at Fremont Speedway, 10th at Attica Raceway Park and sixth in the Mid-American Sprint Series.

For more information, contact Deb Martin at 419-426-6803; Danette Brown at 419-681-1942; or Michelle Boring at 419-426-1400.

It's been a long, strange journey for Sarah Fisher from most popular driver in the Indy Racing League to the minor leagues of stock car racing.

Before anyone had heard of Danica Patrick, Fisher was the driver who appeared ready to finally clear a path for women into open-wheel racing.

She came up on the dirt tracks of the Midwest, earning the respect of some of the toughest drivers in American racing. That reputation, as well as a handful of victories in midgets and sprint cars, helped the determined Fisher reach the IRL in 1999 for one race after becoming, at 19, the youngest driver to pass the league's rookie test.

In 2000, she raced in the Indianapolis 500 for the first time and later that season finished third at Kentucky Speedway, the youngest woman in IRL history to lead laps and record a podium finish. The next year, Fisher became the fastest woman qualifier at Indy with a four-lap speed over 229 mph, won a pole at Kentucky and finished a career-best second in Homestead - still the best IRL finish by a woman.

In all, she started five Indy 500s and was voted the series' most popular driver three times. But it wasn't enough to ensure her future in the open-wheel sport.

Even as she became a fan favorite and showed her skill, Fisher struggled to find sponsorship, found herself racing in subpar equipment, and wound up fading out of the IRL and looking for a ride — any ride.

At her bleakest moment,



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Sarah Fisher started three Indy 500s and was voted the most popular IRL driver three times.

along came Richard Childress, one of the elite team owners in NASCAR.

The two had a chance meeting in April, 2004, at a Chevrolet public relations function in Washington, D.C.

"Richard asked me how things were going and I told him that it could be better," Fisher said. "He said, 'Hey, if you ever decide to drive a stock car, call me.' So, I did."

Childress got Fisher a test in a late-model stock car and liked what he saw. He helped her put together a deal for this year, driving in the NASCAR Grand

McAnally with the support of the Drive for Diversity program. So far, her introduction to

stock car racing has been a mixed bag.

Fisher didn't finish better than 12th in her first four starts, but has managed three top 10s in her last five races. In her most recent start, Fisher qualified sixth at California Speedway, but failed to finish the race because of engine failure.

Still, she insists she is enjoying her transition to the bigger, heavier stock cars.

"We've been running in the driving in the NASCAR Grand top 10 now, and that was our ing pre National West series for Bill goal; just get solid runs," Fisher happy."

said, smiling. "I think Richard's goal in sending me out here was to get laps and learn how to drive a heavy race car."

Most of the NASCAR West schedule is on tracks a mile or less in length, which is just fine with Fisher.

'There's not a better way to learn this than to get on real short tracks and learn how to manipulate and bend the car to get it to do what you want it to do," she said.

'Trying to learn what these cars require in all different areas is our goal and we've been doing pretty good at it. I'm pretty

Hornish not at all used to taking back seat

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BUFFALO — Sam Hornish Jr. finds himself in an unlikely spot underdog.

With two races left, the twotime IRL champion is third in the points standings with no chance of catching leader Dan Wheldon. It's an improvement over finishing seventh last year, but the 26-year-old phenom out of Defiance isn't accustomed to being an also-ran.

"It's weird for me," Hornish said yesterday during a stop to promote the IRL's inaugural race

at Watkins Glen International on Sept. 25. "I feel like my goal is to always be the guy that's expected to win. And when we go to some of these tracks, for whatever reason, they don't expect you to win. You've got to try to prove them wrong.

Hornish, a 14-time series race winner, finished seventh last year. Now his second season with Marlboro Team Penske is coming to a close.

place at Chicagoland Speedway lacks the horsepower to keep up last weekend.

That hasn't been enough to keep up with Wheldon who has run away with the points standings and has won five races, breaking Hornish's single-season record of four. With a 102point lead over Tony Kanaan, Wheldon can clinch the season championship by simply showing up at Watkins Glen.

Hornish chalks up his troubles He's won two of 15 races this to a combination of bad luck and season and enjoyed eight top- a few mistakes. He also acknowlfive finishes, including third edges that his Toyota engine

with the Honda motors used by Wheldon and Kanaan, who is 12 points ahead of Hornish.

Honda-powered cars have won 25 of the IRL's last 31 races while Toyota has won five – Hornish three and teammate Helio Castroneves two. Chevrolet, meanwhile, has won one.

'The wins we've gotten are a lot more special and we appreciate some of the seconds and thirds a little more, but ultimately, it's not the position I'd like to be in," Hornish said.