

# Toho's Classic Waters

BY RONELL SMITH

The lake's  
longest-standing  
guide gives  
his perspective  
on the keys  
to success  
for the  
2006 Classic . . .



Photo: Gerald Crawford



**ANGLERS FISHING** the maiden-cane should find bigger bass than those pros focusing on hydrilla. Photo: Steve Price

**I**N JANUARY 2001, when Dean Rojas came to the scales on opening day of the Bassmaster Top 150 on Lake Tohopekaliga with a jaw-dropping 45 pounds, 2 ounces, it was laid bare for the world to see that California isn't the only place where anglers can catch big bass — and lots of them. The catch, anchored by two fish over 10 pounds, awed anglers and the crowd gathered for the weigh-in.

But before the tournament was over, there would be another 40-pound-plus stringer brought to the scales, and a total of 29 limits of at least 20 pounds, resulting in more than 20 bass over 10 pounds being weighed in at the event. Rojas' 108-12 total over 4 days not only eclipsed the seeming unreachable century mark, it placed a blinding glow on West Lake Toho that still shines bright today.

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**Toho's**  
Classic Waters



It's little wonder that Bassmaster pros are excited that the CITGO Bassmaster Classic will be held at the lake Feb. 24-26.

Anyone familiar with Florida fishing knows that the fish there spawn earlier than in many other parts of the country. It can begin as early as January, according to research done on lakes such as Toho. So there is a chance that when the 51 Classic competitors take off from Kissimmee Lakefront Park on Feb. 24, that they, too, could be privy to the hordes of giant bass that have moved up shallow to spawn.

**WEATHER WILL BE KEY**

"If you get the right conditions, Toho can be one of the best lakes in the country," says Capt. James Jackson, owner of AJ's Freelancer Guide Service, who has guided on the lake for 25 years. "But when you don't get things just right, this place can be real tough."

By "just right," Jackson means a stable barometer. With much of the fishable water in the lake at 6 feet or less, weather will play a key part in the tournament.

"Weather is your biggest control factor," he insists.

When the tournament begins, fish will likely be going onto and coming off of the beds, with the majority having already spawned.

According to Jackson, February on Toho can be feast or famine. When a cold front does come through, the fishing can be thrown into a tailspin, though cold fronts are

**"If you get the right conditions, Toho can be one of the best lakes in the country!"**

not as severe and occur less often than in January. He says that when this happens, the bass in Toho seem to get lockjaw, except for a few hours in the mornings. "You've got to put your fish in the boat in the mornings, because for the rest of the day, you're just going to spend time pitching worms for not much," says Jackson.

For an all-day bite, Classic anglers need to hope for prefrontal conditions. "Just before a cold front, the fish will be willing to bite on top, creating potential for guys fishing soft jerkbaits and white spinnerbaits," he says. But the majority of the fish will be caught on plastic worms in the maidencane grass in the prespawn staging areas.

That jibes well with what Rojas experienced in 2001. A gradual warming trend culminated in hordes of big, egg-laden females moving up to spawn, making them easy pickings for Rojas and several other anglers who took to sight fishing.

"I just pitched in there and held on," says Rojas.

In Jackson's mind, however, there are a number of impediments

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to anglers seeking similar conditions in February.

When you think Florida, a blanketing carpet of hydrilla usually comes to mind. The thick, invasive vegetation is as common in these parts as cottonmouths and alligators. Just don't expect the Classic to be won by guys fishing it.

That's in large part the result of a year-long, \$9 million restoration project in 2004, which consisted of a large-scale drawdown and removal of much of the hydrilla. The effort created plenty of hard, sandy bottoms in many areas, making for ideal spawning grounds.

So the anglers fishing the Classic in February will encounter a different lake. Whereas the 2001 tournament saw anglers flipping plastics to fish spawning near both maidencane and hydrilla, in February the winner will almost certainly focus entirely on maidencane, a thick-bladed grass growing up to 5 feet high and easily the dominant cover on the lake. Indeed, an angler can cover vast amounts of water and never see hydrilla, save a few sparse patches here and there. What's more, with the lake having more stain to the water than it did in 2001, a sight fishing slugfest is all the more improbable, believes Jackson.

#### IN THE GRASS

Having spent more than half his life on the lake after moving down from Maryland in 1980, Jackson has his finger squarely on the pulse of the fishery. Being on the lake more than 250 days a year will do that for an angler. So adept is Jackson at sizing up the lake that he can usually determine whether an area holds fish on any given day without ever putting a line in the water. Magic? No. He just seems to know where the majority of the fish want to be.

"The maidencane by far out-produces hydrilla," he says. "I believe 100 percent that the guys who fish hydrilla are going to be fishing for much smaller fish than what will be caught out of the maidencane."



**SOFT PLASTICS**, like the craw Terry Scroggins used to win the last BASS event on Toho, should dominate the bait selection for Classic pros. Photo: Gerald Crawford

Why is the maidencane so much better? In most cases, the cane is the dominant vegetation near spawning grounds, those areas having hard, sandy bottoms.

#### LOCATION, LOCATION

So it should come as no surprise that of the handful of areas Jackson predicts will yield the Classic winning catch, all are heavily lined with the grass.

The area known as North Steer, which is located on the southern end of the lake, is Jackson's first choice for good fish.

*(Continued on page 20)*



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**SUCCESSFUL PROS** will find areas of maidencane adjacent to spawning flats. These areas will hold both prespawners and postspawners.

Photo: Gerald Crawford

(Continued from page 16)

One of the largest, thickest grass fields on the lake, it has plenty of cover for fish to reside should a cold front move through. But, most importantly, the spot has vast areas of spawning grounds nearby.

"You'll find more guys fishing there than anywhere," says Jackson. "It's one of the most well-known areas, always has been, and for good reason. It's one of the better producing areas, year after year, for as long as the lake has been here."

Two other areas he feels will be popular destinations, for Classic pros are Brown's Point and Whaley's Landing.

Brown's Point, situated on the southwest end of the lake is a huge grass field that abuts a spawning flat on the back side.

Whaley's Landing, however, sits on the southeast end of the lake, down from South Steer Beach, and contains an ocean of maidencane and long stretches of hard bottom. He feels that the most successful anglers will be flipping Texas rigged soft plastics at both locations.

The area known as Shingle Creek will ring a bell to anyone who is familiar with the results of the historic 2001 tournament. It was one of the areas where Rojas really walloped big fish. Not only is it still one of the best spots on West Toho, believes Jackson, but the relatively small area on the western end of the lake is also

## When asked where the tournament will be won, Jackson — never pausing to consider the answer — says North Steer.

one of the few places where anglers can locate bass on both the front and back sides of the grass. In addition to a 200- to 300-yard stretch of bank behind the grass, the area along the front should prove just as fruitful, largely because fish are known to stage on the front side of the grass before moving to the back side to spawn.

When asked where the tournament will be won, Jackson — never pausing to consider the answer — says North Steer. Why? "All that

scattered grass will be loaded with more fish than any of the other areas."

Jackson predicted that, while some anglers are sure to fish some of the lower lakes, including Cypress or Kissimmee, neither is likely to yield the winning catch. He feels that distinction is reserved for Toho.

The \$64,000 question for anglers arriving at this year's Classic — aside from what the weather will bring — is just what weight will it take to win the event. Knowing that a huge cold front could turn the bite off in a hurry, it's a safe bet that most are hoping for stable weather or, preferably, a warm front. If that's the case, those not bringing in some hefty sacks will be left in the cold, says Jackson.

"You better have 35 pounds or better per day," he says, referring to the weights needed under the right conditions. "If you're catching 25 pounds, you might not make the cut."

