

Welcome Aboard- Gary Fooks

So you've watched *AFC* on TV, bought the *Tournament Angler Guide* and now you want in on the tournament circuit – so what's next? Grass-roots events, such as a single-day BREAM Classic or BASS Electric, are one of the most popular ways to kick-start your tournament career. However, for those wanting a higher end start to the tournament scene, entering a BREAM Qualifier or BASS Pro event as a non-boater is the recommended path to take. Down this road you will learn the ropes of competition fishing firsthand and you will get to share a boat with the cream of the crop in tournament circles.

To prove my point, I entered my first ABT BASS event before I'd even seen a bass, let alone caught one. Admittedly that was after having a great time at an ABT BREAM event and having been given encouragement by some experienced bass anglers. Even though I didn't catch a single bass that weekend, I did learn a heck of a lot and very quickly.

Many of the top tournament anglers started out as non boaters for varying reasons. In the following I will outline some tips from seasoned pros to help get you started on the tournament circuit.

OUT OF THE BLUE

Ben Godfrey came from nowhere to BREAM National Champion in one year. Ben tried his first event as a non boater in 2006, and couldn't wait to come back the next year as a boater.

Now, of course, not every new angler is going to race to the top of the pack in their first year, and most anglers will say Ben's success is the exception to the rule. However, his success is no fluke. He has years of experience on the Gold Coast waterways and, as fellow-competitor Aaron Sharp says, "no-one can read an area like Ben Godfrey".

Even though in his first tournament his main aim was just to get his five fish, Ben still treated it like a normal fishing day and dared to experiment. His advice to beginners is to keep learning and push your comfort zone.

"Keep an open mind, and in a tournament don't get stuck using one technique or lure. Go out and try new techniques all day and just don't go back to what's comfortable," said Godfrey.

Ben's ability to learn and remain flexible has helped him to fish consistently throughout the year.

I asked Ben what is the biggest mistake he made when first competing, he said without a doubt that not preparing his gear well enough and having it fail during a tournament. Good lesson to learn.

WATCH AND LEARN

Brisbane BASS Pro, Justin Fraser, followed a slightly different path to Ben, taking his brother Chris's advice and beginning his ABT career at a MotorGuide BASS Electric round. Like Godfrey and many other first time tournament anglers, Justin's main goal for his first tournament was to get his bag limit.

"It was a fantastic event and I walked away with a sense of success. Not only did I make it onto the score board but I also learnt valuable information from watching other anglers on how they went about setting up their gear, allocated their time throughout the session, and most importantly how they caught their fish", explained Fraser.

Justin's analytical and embracing approach to his first event is a beneficial one to adopt for all tournament anglers, whether they be first-timers or hardened tournament pros.

Of course Justin faces the conundrum many tournament anglers do, finding a balance between family, work, and tournaments.

"Like most people my life is fairly busy, so I find it essential to pencil in tournament days on the calendar, doing so means it happens, unlike a social fishing day that tends to get put on the back burner. Setting your sights on a tournament is like planning a fishing holiday, you need to prepare gear, contingency gear, check maps, but most of all you have the anticipation of a day on the water", explained Justin.

As for his tips for first time ABT anglers, Justin recommends preservation of ones hands when it comes to getting your fish out of your livewell.

"Make sure you use one of those little nets and drain the live well to get your fish out. I tried to use my hands at my first comp and came up spiked and bleeding, much to the amusement of my brother", explained the now enlightened Fraser.

A NEW FRONTIER

New South Wales tournament addict Chris Gates dipped his toe into the tournament fishing pool via the ever-expanding Ford Ranger BREAM Series, taking the dive into his first event at the Shimano Clarence River BREAM Challenge 2008.

"I was looking for a new challenge from the 'bait n' wait' fishing that I was doing", said Gates.

"Like many I preferred to watch and wait from the side lines rather than fish a tournament, but that changed when ABT Director Steve Morgan bet me the entry fee that I would love it. Of course, I lost", said the converted breamer.

After 25 years of mixed fishing, from flatties to jews, he's been hooked on bream for the last year.

"I can't encourage people enough to make a move and have a go at fishing your first tournament. Even if you feel you're under skilled and not good enough, give it a go. This is the best place to learn how to do it."

PEARLS OF WISDOM

We spoke to a lot of other ABT anglers along the way and found a few consistent truths. While their backgrounds are all very different, all declare they were by no means a bream, bass or barra expert before they started in ABT.

Filmographer and BREAM fan Jim Xyga agrees, "I've been fishing since I was four, but it wasn't until I started fishing the BREAM events that my level of knowledge and success chasing bream started to climb".

Jim's experience is typical on all three of ABT's tournament tours; the consistent lesson that the majority of anglers adopt is to learn, learn and keep learning. You may not have Ben Godfrey's uncanny ability to spot and locate fish, but it's one that you can learn over time.

When you do catch a fish don't just say 'yippee'. Ask yourself why that fish was there, what it was doing and why did it take this particular lure today?

Like any sport it takes lots of practice. Ben Godfrey fishes at least every second day, but that's not enough according to the keenest Victorian I have ever met.

Jim Xyga admits he has caught the ABT bug, and now fishes a couple of hours a day and about 10-15 hours on the weekends...and then of course there are the tournaments"

In his first year Jim fished in six events covering three states.

DON'T GAMBLE TO WIN

So far its sounds like any other sport. Learn lots and practice even more. But what about goals? The consistent performers don't gamble. They are what coaches call 'risk averse' and play a percentage game.

Translated to fishing, this means get your bag first. Get the five bream, two bass or five barra as soon as possible, no matter what their size (but not under legal take size). Then go looking for upgrades.

"This is the thing that many of the pros try to tick off their to-do list first", explains Berkley Pro Mark Mangold.

"It gets you on the score board and allows you to focus your time and attention on catching the kicker fish you need to win", added the 2008 Gippsland Lakes BREAM Super Series winner.

As for planning your events and the events you're going to fish for the year, there seems to be no winning pattern, except to make a plan and make it as early as possible. By the time you have read this story, ABT will have received sacks full of entry forms for the year. So it seems that an organised plan, well ahead of time is the sign of a winning angler. Thinking, researching and pre-fishing for an event is the only way to go.

EVEN STEVENS

“Tournament fishing is a great leveller”, explained ABT Tournament Director Simon Goldsmith.

“Our anglers come from all sectors of society and from a broad range of age demographics, but the one thing they all have in common is their desire to fish and be the best tournament angler they can be”, added Goldsmith.

The even-playing field that tournament fishing offers marries perfectly with anglers of all walks revelling in the tournament scene. Lawyers, plumbers, and school children regularly rub shoulders at events and have all progressed through the ranks to qualify for grand finals, final shootouts and, of course, win series crowns. And remember the motto of ABT is “Who Shares Wins”.

Tournament fishing all begins in once place, and that’s with your first tournament, and with you.

FACT BOX 1

Non Boaters Tackle Kit

Rods: At the briefing, when you meet your boater ask how many rods you can bring, but plan on two.

Tackle: One standard tackle bag. A size that can carry five or so large Plano boxes is going to be more than enough.

PFD: You are required to bring your own PFD. If you are flying to the event be aware of airline restrictions on inflatable canisters.

Food and drink: Bring plenty to share, it goes a long way. At the last Gold Coast event Tim ‘the Bream’ Morgan was heard at the briefing to say “that guys a great non-boater. He brings the best food to munch on.”

FACT BOX 2

Non Boater Commandments

You are the lucky apprentice on this team so here are the unwritten commandments:

1. At the briefing you’ll be paired up with your two boaters for the weekend. Have business cards handy or just a piece of paper with your name and phone number. Ask where to meet and write down their details – including what the boat looks like.

2. The boater always takes the first cast at a new location, but feel free to follow him soon after.

3. Help out with the boat. Launching and retrieving not only helps the boater but gets the line moving at the ramp as well.

4. Offer some money for petrol. When I was a non boater it was \$20, but it’s probably double that by now. As a tip, I won some smiles by handing over an envelope with the cash at the briefing...and not at the end of the day. After all, the guy had to fill the tank before you went out.

5. It’s up to the boater to decide if it’s worthwhile getting a snag off or just letting you bust off, so try to accept their decision with a smile. Just remember it is trespassing to enter a pontoon, but I always think there is a duty to remove hooks that may catch a hand or foot.