

# Largemouth Bass Tournament Catch Results in Florida

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*Abstract:* Largemouth bass catch data and other information were compiled from records generated from a Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission tournament permitting system implemented in 1975. Popular tournament waters were determined and ranked according to success rates, average weights, and weights of "big bass" reported by tournament sponsors. Commission records indicate 645 bass tournaments were permitted from 1975-1982 with more than 57% staged in the St. Johns River/Rodman Reservoir area, Lake Okeechobee, and the Kissimmee chain of lakes. Between 1978 and 1982, mean tournament success rates statewide were computed at 0.27 bass/hour, while Lake Okeechobee ranked highest at 0.40 bass/hour. Highest average bass weights were reported from the Clermont Chain at 1.18 kg, and statewide weights averaged 0.86 kg. Orange/Lochloosa lakes produced the largest "big bass" reported with a mean weight of 4.26 kg. Results from 1978 to 1982 were compared with preliminary tournament data compiled from 1975 to 1977, and indicated success rates increased in the 3 major tournament areas and statewide, while average weights remained constant. Trends indicate mean weights of "big bass" from major tournament waters and all other areas decreased during data periods. Overall results indicate that competitive fishing currently poses no direct threat to largemouth bass fisheries in Florida.

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With the popularization of competitive fishing for largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) in the mid-1970s, Florida became one of the first states to implement a tournament permitting procedure (Chapman 1977). This permitting system was developed to identify intensively fished areas and determine the need, if any, to restrict or regulate fishing contests. Major areas

of concern included the possibility of over-fishing or negative impact on fishery resources and potential conflicts with nontournament fishermen and other recreational users.

To identify major tournaments from typically smaller fishing contests, an arbitrary set of guidelines was established by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission in 1975. Fishing competition was defined as a "tournament" requiring a permit issued by the Commission, providing any of the following criteria were met:

1. 50 or more fishermen were charged a \$25.00 or more entry fee;
2. 25 or more boats were used during the competition;
3. Prizes exceeding \$1,000 in value were awarded.

Fishing tournament sponsors were provided with an "Application for Fishing Tournament Permit" which was used to obtain preliminary information including location, dates, and expected number of participants. The questionnaire also inquired of tournament rules, plans for disposition of tournament-caught fish, and safety measures. Applications were reviewed with regard to public safety and welfare, possible impairment of recreational rights of others using tournament water bodies, and proper conservation of fishery resources. Generally, requests were approved unless conflicting dates occurred between major tournament sponsors on the same water bodies. Upon approval, a "Fishing Tournament Permit" was issued to tournament sponsors by the Commission.

Tournaments were initially subjected to severe public scrutiny and criticism and as a consequence, live release programs were usually self-imposed by organizers. To further minimize potential conflict with non-tournament fishermen, relatively few tournaments were scheduled by sponsors during summer months when high water temperatures reduced chances for survival of released fish. Although the Commission never adopted an official position on these generally accepted practices, they were encouraged in the interest of public relations.

A "Bass Tournament Summary Report" form was also provided to permitted sponsors and results were solicited within 30 days of tournament completion. Catch information presented here was determined from the data supplied on this form.

The principal objectives of this paper are to: 1) identify popular bass tournament fishing waters in Florida, 2) summarize success rates and weights of largemouth bass in Florida tournaments, 3) compare recent tournament catch results from 1978-1982 with previous findings (Chapman 1977), and 4) subjectively evaluate the effect of these tournaments on Florida's largemouth bass fishery.

## Methods

Tournament catch results were compiled from available information provided on returned "Bass Tournament Summary Reports". Information requested on this form included date(s) of tournament, lakes or streams fished, numbers of contestants, tournament bag limit for bass, hours fished, number of bass entered  $\geq 30.5$  cm, total weight of bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm, weight of largest bass, and number of bass released.

Popular tournament fishing waters were determined from all reports submitted since inception of the permit system in 1975. Individual areas are often listed by watershed or lake and stream systems, since tournament provisions usually allowed fishermen to range considerable distances through connecting waters. Catch records provided by tournament sponsors from 1978 to 1982 were used as the primary source of data for this report; however, data from Chapman (1977) were also incorporated when appropriate. Major tournament areas were addressed individually for relative success comparisons. All data provided on report forms were submitted in English units and later converted to metric. Data from years 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1982 were incomplete, and results were determined from available information.

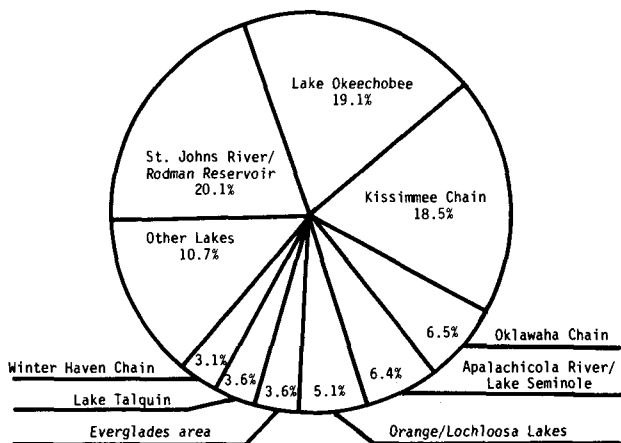
Most tournaments imposed a 30.5 cm (12 inch) minimum size limit and catch results reported here are based on this parameter. Data obtained from tournaments imposing a 35.6 cm (14 inch) size limit were not used in computation of tournament data. Unless specified on data forms, a daily bag limit of 10 bass was assumed and data from sponsors reporting other limit restrictions were discarded.

Success rates were computed from total man hours and total numbers of bass reported caught from respective areas. Mean weights were determined by dividing the weight of all bass caught in each tournament area by the total number of bass delivered to the weigh station. "Big bass" data were derived by averaging the largest bass reported from each tournament in a given area. A 3-year period of data for the calendar years 1979–1981 which appeared to be complete and representative was used to compute "average" tournament parameters and success information.

## Results

At least 645 tournaments were permitted by the Commission between 1975 and 1982. Percent compliance from tournament sponsors in providing catch information was approximately 70%; however, some tournaments were reportedly cancelled without notification which would increase this percentage.

Greatest tournament pressure consistently occurred in 3 major areas;



**Figure 1.** Percent frequency of largemouth bass tournaments for popular Florida fishing areas between 1975 and 1982.

the St. Johns River system including Rodman Reservoir, Lake Okeechobee, and the Kissimmee chain of lakes (Table 1, Fig. 1). Collectively, more than 57% of tournament pressure was directed to these 3 areas. The popularity of these areas was attributed to their size and historical reputation for bass fishing. Other important tournament fishing areas in descending order of fre-

**Table 1.** Number of permits issued by year and location for largemouth bass fishing tournaments in Florida by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission between 1975–1982.

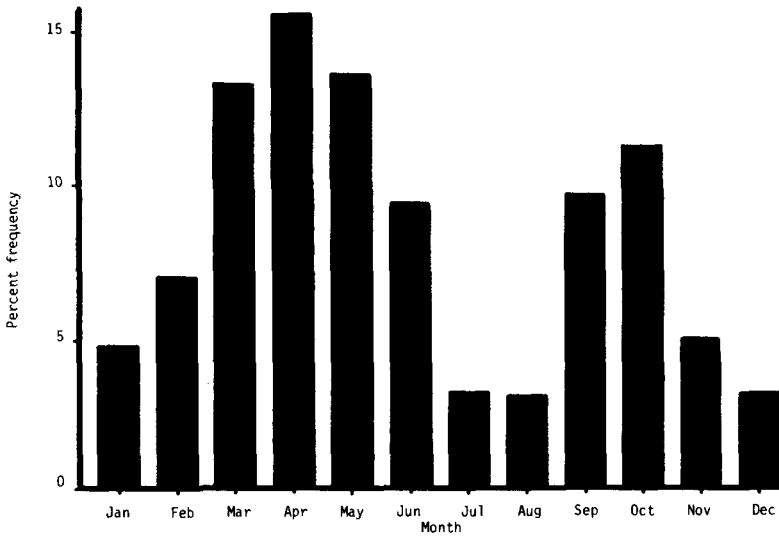
Tournament area	Year								Total
	1975 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	1976 <sup>b</sup>	1977 <sup>b,c</sup>	1978 <sup>c</sup>	1979	1980	1981	1982 <sup>c,d</sup>	
St. Johns River/Rodman Reservoir	5	15	17	22	24	20	19	13	135
Lake Okeechobee	4	13	16	24	23	15	20	8	123
Kissimmee Chain	11	23	10	16	16	13	25	5	119
Oklawaha Chain	—	2	10	4	7	7	7	5	42
Apalachicola River/Lake Seminole	—	5	5	11	5	8	5	2	41
Orange/Lochloosa Lakes	1	2	1	1	10	8	5	5	33
Everglades Area	—	3	4	4	7	2	2	1	23
Lake Talquin	—	3	4	4	2	3	4	3	23
Winter Haven Chain	—	1	1	2	3	4	6	3	20
Clermont Chain	—	2	2	2	1	4	4	2	17
Miscellaneous areas	1	9	9	14	13	4	11	8	69
Total	22	78	79	104	111	88	108	55	645

<sup>a</sup> Permitting system initiated, July 1975.

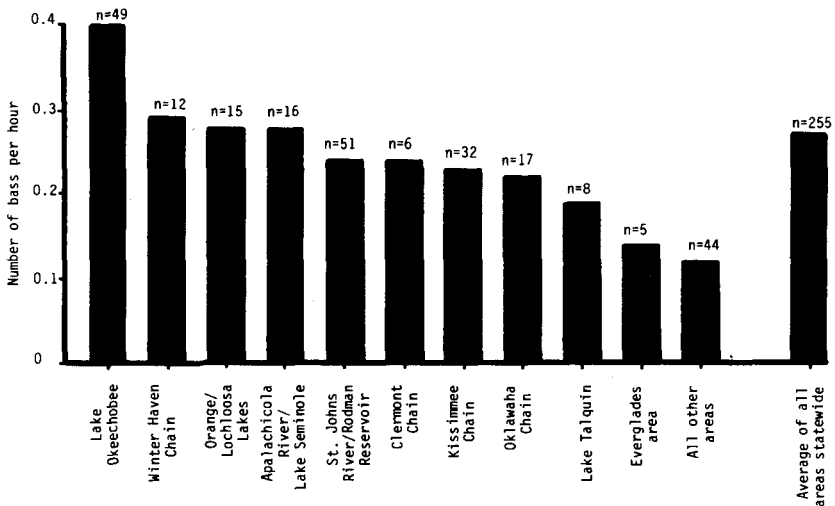
<sup>b</sup> From Chapman (1977).

<sup>c</sup> Data incomplete.

<sup>d</sup> Permitting system terminated, June 1982.



**Figure 2.** Percent frequency by month for largemouth bass tournaments in Florida, 1979 to 1981 ( $N = 307$ ).



**Figure 3.** Mean success rates of tournament caught largemouth bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm in Florida between 1978–1982 ( $N =$  numbers of tournaments).

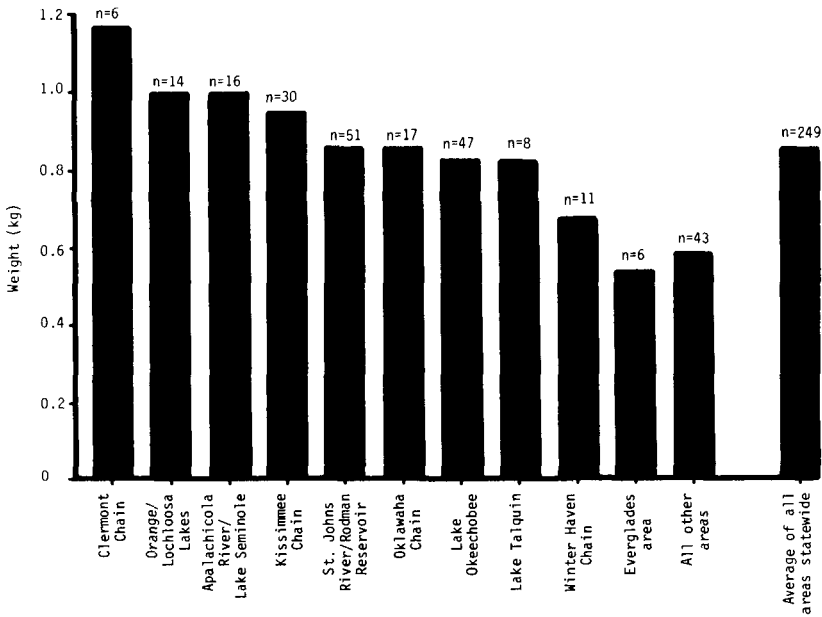


Figure 4. Mean weight of tournament caught largemouth bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm in Florida between 1978–1982 ( $N =$  number of tournaments).

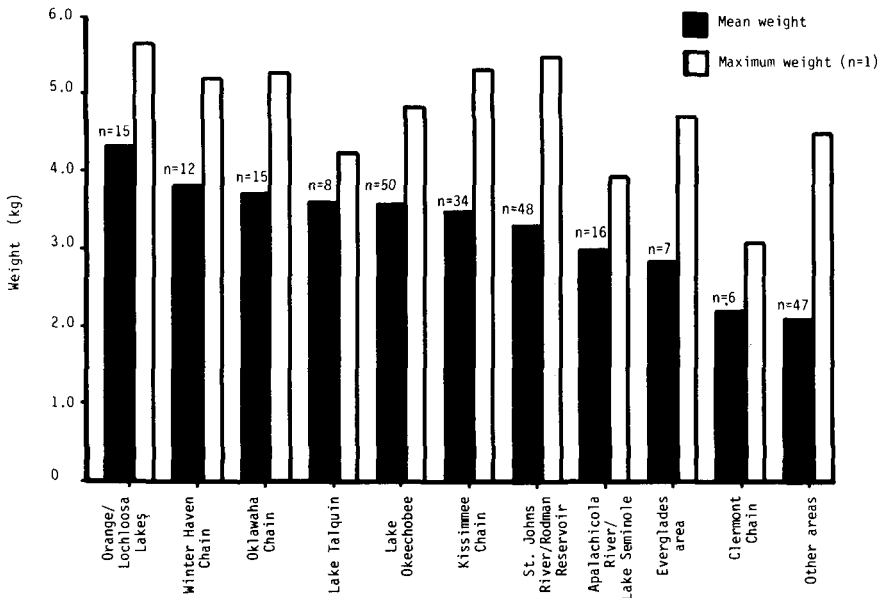


Figure 5. Mean and maximum weights of “big bass” caught in Florida tournaments between 1978–1982 ( $N =$  number of tournaments).

quency were the Oklawaha Chain, Apalachicola River/Lake Seminole, Orange/Lochloosa lakes, Everglades area, Lake Talquin, and the Winter Haven chain.

In 143 of 586 tournaments, participants fished multiple days. According to submitted records, 128 2-day tournaments, 13 3-day, and 1 each of 4- and 7-day tournaments were scheduled between 1975 and 1982.

Completed data from 202 tournaments held between 1979–1981 indicate that the “average” tournament was 11 hours in duration and was attended by 78 participants. During an “average” tournament, 858 man hours of fishing were expended, and approximately 224 bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm, weighing 173 kg and averaging 0.77 kg were reported. Mean success rates were determined to be 0.26 bass/hour and 0.20 kg bass/hour. Average weight for the “big bass” category was 3.36 kg ( $N = 197$ ).

Tournament pressure was greatest during spring months (Fig. 2). A secondary peak occurred in the early fall, and relatively few tournaments were scheduled in July, August, and December.

Average success rates for largemouth bass by area are illustrated in descending order in Fig. 3. Lake Okeechobee rated highest statewide at 0.40 bass/hour followed by other popular areas with success rates between 0.14 and 0.29 bass/hour. The average success rate statewide was 0.27 bass/hour.

Largest average bass weight was reported from the Clermont chain with a mean of 1.18 kg (Fig. 4), but the sample size was relatively small ( $N = 6$ ). The Orange/Lochloosa lakes and the Apalachicola River/Lake Seminole area ranked second with weights of 1.00 kg. Lowest average weight for all areas evaluated was 0.54 kg and the statewide average for tournament bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm was 0.86 kg.

Largest “big bass” weight (Fig. 5) was reported from Orange/Lochloosa lakes. Big bass averaged 4.26 kg, 0.45 kg larger than the second ranked area with a mean weight of 3.81 kg. Orange/Lochloosa lakes also produced the largest single bass reported between 1978 and 1982 at 5.62 kg, and during a 1-year period in 1979, the mean weight for big bass was 4.75 kg ( $N = 6$ ). The Clermont chain, which ranked highest for average tournament bass weight, ranked lowest for big bass at 2.27 kg. The largest tournament bass reported since initiation of the permitting system was caught in the Kissimmee chain in August 1975, and weighed 5.94 kg.

Seasonal variations in success rates were relatively low in major tournament areas. Success rates for Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee chain were highest in the first 3 months of the year, while the St. Johns River area experienced the lowest catch rate during this quarter. Statewide seasonal catch rates were higher in first and fourth quarters and slightly lower in second and third quarters when compared to catch rates observed seasonally in 1975–1977.

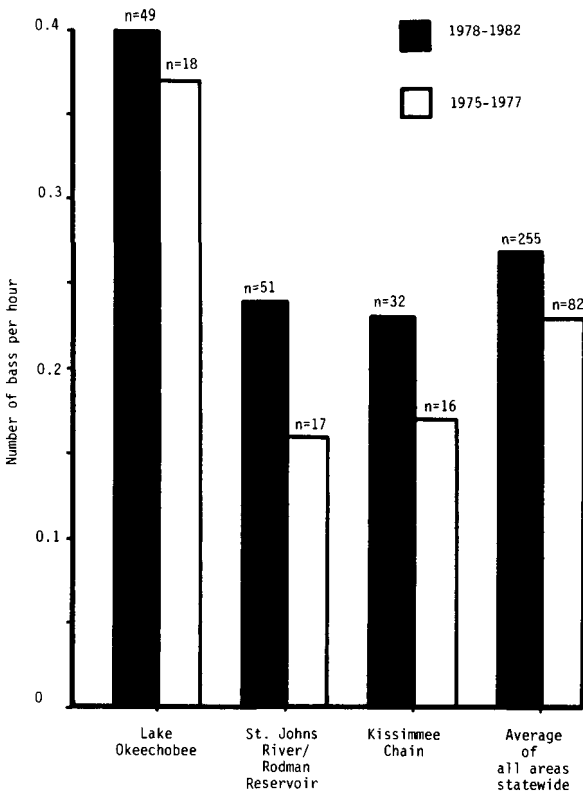
Average weights appeared to fluctuate little between seasonal quarters in Lake Okeechobee and all areas collectively. Greater size variations oc-

cured seasonally in the Kissimmee chain and the St. Johns River/Rodman area with bass 0.18 kg larger than other quarters noted in the second and first quarters, respectively.

Annual success rates and average weights were determined for the 3 major tournament areas. At Lake Okeechobee, success rates fluctuated erratically with extremes of 0.25 bass/hour in 1980 to 0.55 bass/hour in 1982. A progressive improvement in catch rates was indicated in the St. Johns River/Rodman area which increased from 0.21 to 0.29 bass/hour between 1978 and 1982. Success rates in the Kissimmee Chain peaked at 0.28 bass/hour in 1979, but gradually declined to 0.19 bass/hour by 1981 (1982 data not available). In the 3 major areas, average annual weights generally fluctuated inversely with catch rates.

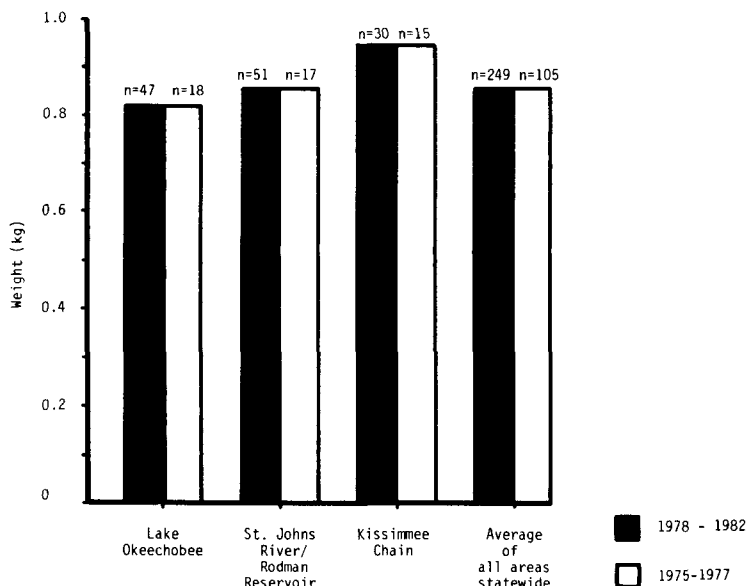
**Discussion**

Florida bass tournament catch rates (Fig. 3) typically occurred within the “usual” range of 0.1 – 0.3 bass/hour reported for national tournaments

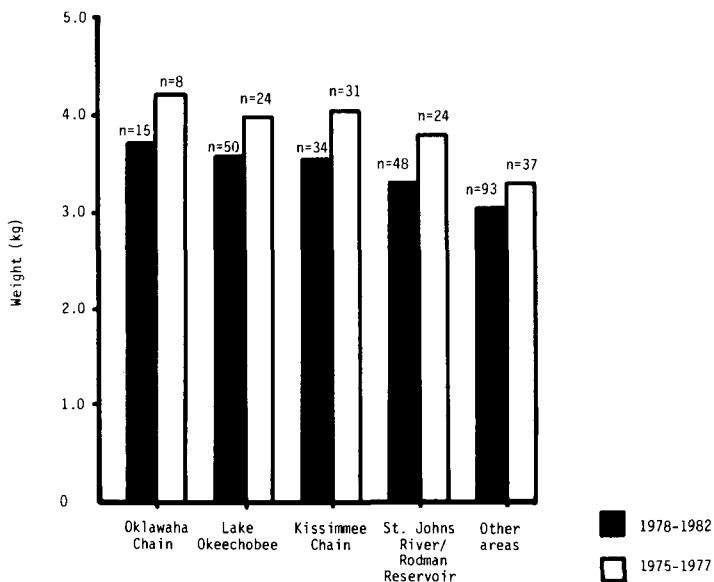


**Figure 6.** Comparison of mean success rates for tournament caught largemouth bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm in major tournament areas between 1975–1977 and 1978–1982 ( $N$  = number of tournaments).





**Figure 7.** Comparison of mean weights for tournament caught largemouth bass  $\geq 30.5$  cm in major tournament areas between 1975-1977 and 1978-1982 ( $N$  = number of tournaments).



**Figure 8.** Comparison of mean weights of "big bass" caught in Florida Tournaments by area between 1975-1977 and 1978-1982 ( $N$  = number of tournaments).

by Holbrook in 1975 (the exception being Lake Okeechobee, which exceeded this range). Tournament success rates and average bass weights reflect minimum size regulations and an option to the fisherman to "cull" small fish. Additionally, data reported by tournament sponsors do not include bass released in the relatively few instances where fishermen exceeded a catch greater than 10 bass daily. Therefore, direct comparison with nontournament generated creel data is not possible. In most cases, however, an empirical comparison of success rates and average weights appear comparable to the catch information reported by nontournament fishermen.

Mean tournament success rates determined for the years 1978 to 1982 were compared with data from 1975 to 1977 (Figs. 6, 7, 8). Recent success rates for major tournament areas as well as statewide were all higher than those reported by Chapman (1977). The largest catch increase occurred in the St. Johns River/Rodman area which had the lowest success rate (0.16 bass/hour) reported for major areas between 1975 to 1977 (Fig. 6). Reasons for improved catch rates are not clear but may be attributed at least partially to increased expertise and highly improved fishing equipment among competitive fishermen. Average weights for respective areas were identical between data periods (Fig. 7).

Big bass weights from the 3 major tournament areas, the Oklawaha chain and all other areas combined were compared with averages computed for the 1975–1977 data period (Fig. 8). In all instances, average size was lower for the 1978–1982 period. Comparative trends for large bass catches were not available from other specific areas due to limited data. Although cumulative data indicates an apparent decline in the weights of trophy size bass in recent years, tournament fishing is not believed to be directly responsible, since organized fishing from major tournaments represents only a small percentage of total bass fishing pressure.

"Live release" estimates in tournaments typically ranged from 40% to 80% of total catch. Mortality estimates provided with tournament summary reports varied widely, and were likely subjectively biased and superficial in most instances. Following release, delayed mortality often occurs (May 1972), negating the accuracy of "live release" estimates. Regardless, most tournaments employed conscientious attempts at release programs and collectively, the practice likely had positive effects of recycling many tournament-caught largemouth bass to other anglers.

Based on the results of bass tournament data, early public concerns regarding the possibility of adverse consequences from competitive fishing seem to be unfounded. Bass tournaments have had no apparent negative impact on bass fisheries in Florida, and as a result of this conclusion, the tournament permitting system was discontinued in July, 1982.

**Literature Cited**

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