Illinois high school sports dives into one of the oldest competitions on Earth—sport fishing.

Frankfort Community High School in West Frankfort became the first school in the nation to bring home a state championship trophy for the newly sanctioned IHSA sport of competitive team bass fishing.

(Photos courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Carlyle Lake.)

The Sport for Reel Fans

Story By Joe McFarland

Can fishing be a competitive sport? You bet. Just ask Steve Graves, a member of the Peoria-based River City Casters bass club, where the urge to challenge other fishermen for bragging rights always runs deep.

The club's die-hard bass anglers hold regular fish-offs and prize tournaments around central Illinois, including the Illinois River. With strategy and technique the key to success, Graves and his fellow bass anglers rarely reveal their secrets. But in a surprisingly generous move, he and other bass experts are now sharing their tricks of the competitive trade with a new generation of bass anglers: high school students.

"When I heard about the new program to get students involved in bass fishing at one of our club meetings, I knew I had to volunteer," Graves explained. Such generosity doesn't come without sacrifice. Despite the chronic pain he endures from an old back injury, the former iron worker knew his expertise as a tournament-winning bass angler in Illinois could help local students get an edge on the water—and, more importantly, draw them outdoors.

During the 2009 state finals held at Carlyle Lake, team anglers aggressively chased bass with the ultimate bragging rights on the line.

"We didn't have this sports opportunity when I was in school," Graves said. Standing 5'-6" and weighing 150, Graves said he wasn't always a first-pick for heavyweight sports in school. But competitive fishing, he pointed out, has little to do with the size of the competitor and everything to do with the size of the catch.

Realizing he had the ability to help students compete on the water, this Pekin resident contacted local high school officials to offer a hand. Soon he was teaching everything from casting

For scores of Illinois high school students—some of them not yet old enough to drive—the chance to operate a bass boat with their coach in a championship bass tournament was victory enough.

exercises to bass-finding strategies from his own experience to a team of Pekin high school students.

"I told the kids, 'You don't have to be a giant to win a bass tournament,'" Graves said. His encouraging words quickly earned him a nickname: "Right away they started calling me 'coach.'"

His student fishermen did so well through early competitions and regional qualifying championships, they eventually found themselves at the first-ever Illinois state championship held at Carlyle Lake on May 8 last year. It was the first of its kind in the nation.

As a newly sanctioned sport by the Illinois High School Association, team bass fishing not only guides students into nature, it lets them challenge themselves and opponents in a competition that's as ancient as fishing itself.

"Already there are more than 240 four-man teams registered for the 2010 tourney, with sectionals on 19 lakes," explained Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Biologist and IHSA liaison Dan Stephenson. Those 240-plus schools include students living in both rural and urban regions of the state. "At last year's championship, the top 10 came from all areas of Illinois," he noted.

At Pekin, where Graves coached his team to the state championship, team member Austin Pool hooked more than he could have imagined while getting ready for the pre-championship round.

"The weekend before our sectionals I caught a 17-inch, 3-pound crappie on a chatterbait," the freshman bass angler reported. Although tournament bass fishing is a catch-and-release competition, where bass get released after the weigh-in, the unexpected crappie was fair game for keeping. "I'm getting that one mounted," Pool grinned.

Stephenson pointed out that competitive, team bass fishing became an instant favorite among Illinois high school students after it was incorporated into the ranks of official IHSA-sanctioned school sports in 2008.

Student anglers quickly figured out one of the tricks of veteran anglers: Great fishing opportunities are often "hidden" in plain view.

"There were 2,496 students who started the competition in the winter of 2008-09," Stephenson said, explaining how student anglers, along with their teammates, fish their way up the ranks through a series of regional and sectional competitions. "Among those—and this is significant—1,361 of them were not participating in any other IHSA-sanctioned sport."

Competitive bass fishing not only is appealing to students who weren't otherwise involved in sports, it's giving them a healthy and eye-opening opportunity to be outdoors in nature.

"I want to give the students as much time on the water as I can," Pekin coach Graves said (his bass club now allows student anglers to tag along during their own club events). "I figure that every hour spent out on the water for them is one less hour they're going to spend sitting indoors staring at a computer."

"People can find out more by going on the IHSA Web site (ihsa.org)," Stephenson pointed out. "It has become so popular, the IHSA set up a fishing site: thefuturefisheshere.org."

The 2010 IHSA state bass fishing tournament competition will be May 7-8 at Carlyle Lake.