Championship Day

At the Illinois High School Association bass championship, suspense hooks everyone.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

2009 state championship third-place finishers St. Charles made a strong finish on the final day of the 2010 championship.

It's nearing the final hour of competition at the Illinois state high school bass fishing championship at Carlyle Lake, but some of the fishing boats already are returning to the docks.

For now, only the fishermen know why they've stopped fishing. The strong northwest wind has been an issue. The sun continually disappears and reappears every few seconds as clouds shift across the sky. In the nearby parking lot, two rows of vendor tents are snapping loudly in the distance. There's a sudden chill in the air when the sun vanishes. People wear sweatshirts and jackets as they watch the boats out on the water. Earlier in the day, all competition boats were ordered to move over to the west side of the lake for safety. During the night, a strong cold front passed through here—bad news for fishermen. Experienced anglers know bass get that thing called lockjaw after a cold front rolls in. Even professional bass fishermen, the ones on TV who always seem to catch fish, fall humbly silent after a cold front hits the water.

Maine West (DesPlaines) High School came to the scales with a 5-bass limit weighing 8 pounds 3 ounces.

As several boats move toward the parking lot to trailer up early, nobody's talking about what might or not have been caught today. It's a ritual of secrecy, and everybody's in on the game. Among competitors and their supporters, this part of the competition is a high-stakes charade of unrelated small talk, white lies and misleading body language. Everyone is dying to know what's on board in each live well. But nobody reveals anything meaningful. As participants and onlookers interact with guarded expressions, there's a palpable suspense hanging in the air, increasing as the minutes tick away, closing in on the final event—the official weigh-in.

Across the parking lot one announcer on the event stage is now tapping a microphone thunderously. He's holding two clipboards under his arm, pages of statistics held tight against the gusting wind. In front of the announcer, behind a row of banners separating the audience from the impending ceremonies, a few dozen onlookers already have settled in to claim front-row spectator seating. Everyone chats in polite discourse, families meeting families. They wish each other well. But the crowd freezes with sudden anticipation each time the announcer taps the microphone.

Others pass the time by fishing themselves. Balanced on the rocky breakwater by the docks is 9-year-old Jarrett Bain, tending to a bobber while his father casts nearby. Both await the return of Jarrett's stepbrother Derrick Hoffman, a senior at St. Charles High School. Hoffman's team is a returning qualifier that finished in third-place last year.

"Tomorrow's my birthday," Bain reports while squinting in the sunlight. "I'll be 10."

He realizes it was a mistake to speak. He lost his focus. There was a strike that very moment, he insists, his eyes narrow. Quickly he returns his attention to the bobber. Crappie are in the vicinity. A few moments

Families awaiting the return of high school competitors joined the action from shore. The father-son team of Lee and Jarrett Bain cast for crappie while awaiting Jarrett's step-brother Derrick Hoffman from St. Charles (p. 14).

earlier, his father Lee reeled in a nice crappie, and Bain held it up for display.

Here comes another distraction for the young angler: Rounding the bend now appears a competitor's bass boat with two young men standing tall, still actively working the shore for bass. They know there is still time to complete a limit. And one bass can change everything in the ounce-by-ounce measure of tournament fishing. Bain glances up in awe, as if spotting celebrities. The approaching high school students, trolling into the wind, look like rock stars in sunglasses and baseball hats as they navigate their boat closer along the shore. They're from Highland. As they reel, whipping crankbaits at edge of the shoreline, they troll closer to Bain. Silently, Bain retrieves his meager line to allow the high school fishermen to cast at his feet, then pass. There is reverence in his deed. He dares not interfere with fate and the history being made. A passing military procession could receive no greater respect.

In a few minutes, the crappie begin to bite again for the father and son. Bain and his father begin to cast in earnest for another 20 minutes, even as the crowd increases near the stage.

Near the boat launch where the crowds gather to snoop, the team from Moline, currently in fifth-place after yesterday's strong opener, appears far too confident to have failed today.

"You'll just have to wait and see," Zach Latting taunts with a cocky grin. It's his game face, he says, pointing at himself. Either he's bluffing aggressively, like a gutsy casino player, or he believes he'll be holding a state championship trophy in a few minutes.

A voice booms from the microphone. This is show time.

"All right!" bellows a southern drawl from two enormous speakers. "How you all doing today?" Spines tingle. The final weigh-in of the second annual Illinois High School Association state bass fishing championship is about to begin.

Forty four bass fishing teams from across Illinois have fished their way through regional championships to experience this moment. For the next hour, one by one, individual teams will be announced and roll up to the stage for the official weigh-in. It's a Hollywood spectacle: A driver pulls each boat forward, stopping precisely where a man in an orange vest is holding up his hand. Aboard the boats, team members acknowledge the cheering crowd with their best celebrity wave, then quickly kneel before the live well to reveal their catch. The announcers pump up the volume.

"Healthy-lookin' bass!" both announcers boom as splashing bass get lifted from aerated livewells. "Whoa—now there's a fine one! Folks, how…about…that?"

The crowd gasps. Holding up a caught fish before a crowd, these students discover, is like holding up a Superbowl trophy in front of millions of TV viewers. This is the triumph of sport. The glory is immense. As the boats pull into the spotlight, freshman and seniors alike bask in the state championship glory. Emotional parents in the distance raise cameras, then press forward in the crowd. Mothers are crying openly. Fathers have clenched jaws, smiling bravely.

"Remember folks, these anglers were champions even before they got here," one announcer calls out to the crowd. "Each of these teams had to qualify at the regional level before earning a spot in this Illinois state championship…the first of its kind in the country!"

It quickly becomes clear these high school bass anglers really know how to catch bass. Despite the cold front, teams managed to catch bass that weren't even known to exist.

"Well, I guess they made a liar out of me," DNR fisheries biologist Dan Stephenson grinned from nearby, shaking his head. Stephenson knows Carlyle Lake as well as anyone. He samples the lake regularly and told everyone when they arrived not to expect ideal opportunities for large bass this year.

"We have a couple of strong year classes for bass coming up," Stephenson explained as the announcer called out

Confident Moline teammates Zach Latting (left) and Brady Barlow discuss the events of the day as they prepare to roll to the stage with a five-bass limit of 11 pounds, 4 ounces—and claim a second-place finish.

Edwardsville freshman Dalton Wesley astonished the crowd by hefting two amazing bass he caught during windy, generally poor fishing conditions.

weights in the background. "But they're small right now."

After pausing, he added, "So much for that advice. If you would have told me these kids were going to catch 348 pounds of bass on their first day I honestly wouldn't have believed it."

The students are really beginning to work their celebrity now, watching the showmanship of each boat ahead. The crowd is now standing, pressed against the long barrier of signs. There is a frenzy of anticipatory drama as the anglers reach into livewells before lifting a bass. If no fish is immediately produced, especially as wild explosions of water splash skyward from the live well, the frenzy of desire increases by the second.

Dalton Wesley of Edwardsville now rolls ahead on his team boat and opens the livewell. He's either being coy or he's got some important fish in the boat. The slightly built Edwardsville freshman can't seem to get a handle on the bass only he can see.

The announcers wait silently now, having finished their introduction. Seconds pass. Wesley is struggling to grab his catch, whatever it is. Finally he abandons the standard, one-handed grab and reaches both arms into the livewell as the crowd begins to chuckle. It would seem he can't get a grasp on a small and lively bass, everyone has decided. They are wrong.

Wesley carefully pulls his arms from the water.

"Will you look…at…that!" the announcer nearly screams into the microphone. Wesley has both palms around a tremendous bass he's managed to lift out of the water—and then he quickly pulls out a second bass, grabbing it by the jaw with ease.

The crowd erupts. It's chaos. Both announcers holler into microphones as Wesley hefts the bass up for all to see.

"Can you believe what we're seeing! Folks, will you take a look at those fish? Just look at them!"

Edwardsville team members carry the bagged fish up to the stage to be weighed. The announcers stare at the scale, then yell out a weight. Edwardsville jumps 23 spots in the standings.

The ceremony continues. Along comes Illini West. Currently in sixth place, this Carthage team wastes no time in pulling out a five-bass limit that puts them at over 30 pounds of bass for two days—and in first place. This is pandemonium. But it's not over.

The confident guys from Moline roll up—and quickly pull out a four-bass total that puts them in second place. These guys weren't bluffing. For several more minutes the state championship trophy looks to be headed to Carthage with a two-day total of 30 pounds, 5 ounces.

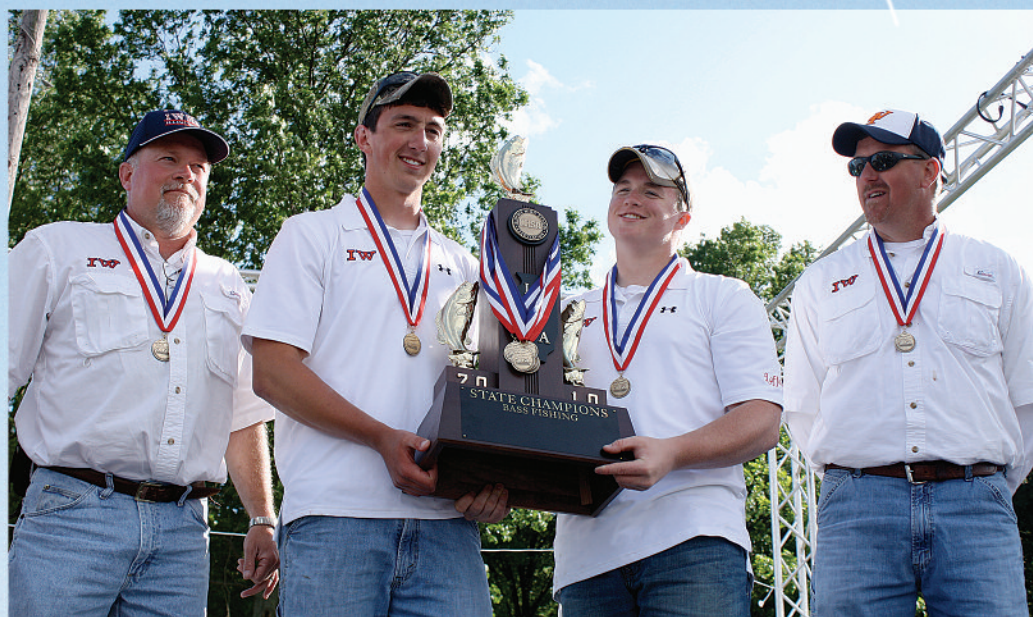
But there are still the leaders from Friday to weigh in.

People are pacing. Gibson City weighs in—not enough. Then Monticello—no good.

"Carthage!" both announcers holler. "Your 2010 state champions!" The giant speakers are no match for the roaring crowd and shriek of whistles. Nobody hears what's said.

Nothing else matters.

Dunlap teammates Alaina Cranford and Brandon Lavery prepare to show off their combined, five-bass catch of 7 pounds, 2 ounces.



Carthage (Illini West) hooked two state championships in one year. Fishing and football teammates Travis Wilson and Brian Lafferty brought home the ultimate fishing bragging rights May 8, a follow-up to last season's football championship.