

Non-boating in the New Mexico Bass Federation

By Brian Stangel (2008 NMBFN non-boater)

As a long-time fisherman and an occasional walleye tournament angler, the last two years have been an eye opener. Having fished competitively for walleye and now trying to cut my teeth in the grass roots of bass fishing, the BASS Federation Nation, it has been a steep learning curve. Fortunately I was welcomed by a group of seasoned fishermen that anyone would be fortunate to fish with, the High Country Bass Anglers. In an attempt to shed a little light on the process and also help you avoid some of my mistakes, I wanted to share the following.

In late 2006 I contacted the NMBFN president through the B.A.S.S. Federation Nation page

http://sports.espn.go.com/outdoors/bassmaster/federation/news/story?page=bass_fed_region_links, after several months of not getting a response I asked

around at Charlie's Sporting Goods and talked to Bryan Talmadge. The folks at Charlie's gave me the information for the Hawg Hunters, Socorro and Four Corners clubs and Bryan steered me in the direction of the High Country Bass Anglers. Bryan and I have spent several days fishing together and he had a pretty good idea of what I was looking to achieve by joining a club (chapter). One of the biggest things I can share at this point is to make sure you know what you are looking for before you go looking. Having spent several weekends up in the Four Corners area in early 2007, the group there is very active and directly involved with the well-being of bass fishing in New Mexico. Unfortunately they were even further than the Los Alamos group and that was my deciding factor between the two clubs.

The first step, joining BASS, is easy; this link provides solid information on how to get started and you do not need to join a club to join BASS.

<http://sports.espn.go.com/outdoors/bassmaster/federation/index>

After you are a member of BASS (\$15 as of May 2008) the next step is to contact a local club (or one that fits your needs, more on this later) and join the Federation Nation (\$20) through your club president who will also assist you in joining the New Mexico Bass Federation (\$20) and the club (HCBA \$20). This may all sound somewhat overwhelming, but it isn't and you do get a great deal in my opinion for somewhere in the neighborhood of \$75. Joining BASS gets you a subscription to *Bassmaster Magazine* and joining Federation Nation gets you a subscription to *Bass Times* two of the better fishing publications on the market. All-in-all it is not a bad deal when you consider the two subscriptions and all of the other benefits from Federation Nation partners and sponsors.

The first tournament experience in the NMBFN was at Ute Lake in July...not necessarily the hottest bite on the planet, but there were fish to be caught. Of course I showed up being told "don't worry, there are always more boaters than non-boaters"...until July 2007. Fortunately Rick Hipp (ABQ Hawg Hunters)

sacrificed his non-boater position and signed up as a boater. With all the “randomness” in the pairings, Rick and I ended up fishing together on Day 1...which a lot of people felt was unfair since Rick and I had fished Ute together quite a bit, but as our results reflected...Rick and I were counting on some seasoned boaters to put us on fish...since we couldn't seem to figure it out on our own. Day 2 paired me with Mike Tafoya from the Four Corners club and although I had crossed paths with Mike, we did not really know each other at all. Once again, another day on the water that I will not forget anytime soon, Mike was very easy to fish with and we had a great time. Struggling to find and catch fish we made the best of our day...unfortunately we tried to make our day one hour longer than everyone else's. Mike and I found some fish later in the day started to catch some decent fish. We kept checking the GPS on the boat for time and knew that we were in good shape with a couple hours to fish...or one. With about 30 minutes to our weigh-in we were tracked down across from the launch by David and Donna Herrera who wondered if we were broken down. Of course not, we just didn't know how to tell time, after blanking on Day 1 we were both allowed to release all of our fish for an official zero on Day 2...lesson learned. Always check a watch...and make sure your GPS is set for the time zone you are in...not the one you fished a month ago.

The Presidents Cup at Navajo in September was a great event and gave me a chance to meet a lot more people as it was the grand finale of the year and also had a spectacular raffle which included a fully loaded 2007 Triton powered by a Mercury 250 Pro XS. From the dinner to the annual awards it was a top notch event which everyone seemed to enjoy. This tourney had me paired with Mike Tafoya again on Day 1 and Danny Nelson, also of the Four Corners club, on Day 2, this was my first time to Navajo ever and it was a pretty incredible place. Mike and Danny both knew the lake well and showed me a ton about how they fish that time of year on Navajo, which were completely different strategies. On Day 2, Danny and I had struggled and we ended up hitting a spot from Day 1 that Mike and I had fished. Not knowing all the “etiquette” of fishing, my gut (or ethics) told me that I had to keep my mouth shut as we were only 50 yards from where I had caught a nice limit with Mike the day before. We ended up rolling through the same water eventually...but I still felt that it was not appropriate to share this information as it was not mine to share.

After that tournament, I shared the experience and queried Bob, our club president about the experience. Bob shared an entire host of rules (which I was unaware of) and also some unwritten etiquette that I think a lot of people may not think about. Whether it is harmless in its intent or not, the sharing of information from a non-boater to a boater, information which was not solely obtained by the non-boater, should never happen. The boaters have most likely spent time, some considerable time, finding out how to catch fish and for a non-boater who spent hours with that boater to share that information willingly is just wrong.

Also as part of this conversation, Bob and I discussed a host of other things that I was not aware of, but made a lot of sense...well almost all of them. For a complete list of the "old" NMBFN Bylaws you can read them here <http://www.abqsportfishing.com/nmbass/bylaws.html> . There have been several Directors changes to the Bylaws which are not reflected but will be updated soon.

Off limits was the first thing that I think a lot of people either forget about or overlook. Even as non-boaters we have to abide by ALL the same rules as the boaters. Under the current [amended] Bylaws of the NMBFN, waters are off limits from Monday through Thursday prior to any tournament with the exception of any holidays. For more specific answers be sure to contact your club Director or one of the NMBFN Tournament Directors, Denise or Kenny Hansel.

Also of significance is that all the same rules that apply during the tournament also are in full force during official practice or pre-fish days, which are generally the Friday before a tournament. Consuming alcohol while on the water, not wearing a life vest while the main motor is operational (including the kill switch) or even trolling (yes, this one was the hard one for me to swallow) can be cause to have you disqualified from the tournament. As someone who is new to the sport, it was helpful to have club members to talk with that explained several of the items above which I may have potentially violated...albeit unknowingly. As the adage goes, "Ignorance is not an excuse".

Enough soap box material, obviously there has been a tremendous benefit for myself personally through this entire experience. Aside from the BASS and Federation Nation benefits/subscriptions, joining a club has given me the opportunity to learn from anglers that are more experienced at bass tournament fishing, plain and simple. Not every experience has been some tremendous enlightenment, but I can say that every experience has taught me something, some more than others. Having heard more than once "Why do I want to be a non-boater?" or "I catch just as many fish as the tournament guys, why should I take the back of the boat?" all I have to say is the following. When you have a chance to fish with any number of the NMBFN boaters, several of which have competed at the Divisionals and advanced to the BFNC (some even the Classic)...some for more than 20 years...you cannot buy that kind of knowledge and it would potentially take a lifetime to accumulate! New Mexico has proven itself over and over again as a dominant force with our traveling team...why wouldn't you want to spend a day on the back of the boat with one of these people?

This year the NMBFN is off to an incredible start and as this goes to press 14 of our states best anglers will be on their way to Idaho to put New Mexico in the record books again as one of the toughest states in the West. Good Luck!