



## Defensive Fishing

*by Denese Freeman*

### **Why Am I a Co-Angler?**

The main reason I am a co-angler is because of my level of skills. I have been fishing most of my life, however, I did not start fishing for bass or on a competitive level until 2002. My sister Linda gave me a membership to the WBFA for my birthday and said I should join her at their next tournament which was the Robbie Cook Memorial on Grand Lake in Oklahoma. I had no clue what I was in for, but I said "why not." I remember that I fished with Lisa Strenard and Kathy Hurst. I came in 10th place overall and I have been hooked on tournament fishing ever since.

I have been acquiring as much knowledge as possible and honing my skills with each tournament. I always have something to learn and try to take something from each tournament - good or bad - and apply it to the next one. My skills have improved over the years, but only the casting, learning about the equipment such as what type of rods to use, the best reels that suit me, what line to use and what type of lures and techniques. As a co-angler, I have not a clue as to how to go about learning a lake I have never been on before and how to find the fish. I don't even know how to drive a boat, let alone run the trolling motor while trying to fish.

The next reason I am a co-angler is simply money. My husband is and MRI tech at a local hospital and makes good money - enough to pay all our bills and then some. I used to work full-time and bring home a nice, steady pay check, but I decided to go out on my own and do freelance work from home. Now, my income is very sporadic and I cannot depend on it to be a certain amount on any given week. Working for my self, it is very easy to work my schedule around tournaments and I am thankful for that. I do very well to be able to afford the co-angler entry fees, the gas to and from each tournament and I usually split a room with another angler to help cut hotel expenses. This year I have had to pay for each tournament as I go.

I cannot imagine the amount of money it takes to be a pro such as boat payments, boat insurance, car payments to tow the boat, gas and oil and maintenance (not including if it breaks down). I have never put a pencil and paper to the figures, but it is certainly more than I can afford at this time.

Even if I had my own boat, I might consider bringing it to the tournament to do my own pre-fishing, but I am several years away from ever entering a tournament as a pro. I think I will remain a co-angler for awhile. I still have lots to learn and I need to work on my skill set before I can ever consider becoming pro.

### **The Pros of Being a Co-Angler**

- We don't have the enormous expenses and liabilities.
- We are not responsible for the well being of another angler.
- Entry fees are less.
- It's less work.
- It's less stressful.
- If we so choose, we don't have to worry about pre-fishing quite as much.
- We get to watch the pro fish and absorb lots of information from them - I have fished with some awesome pros.
- It is a less expensive way to participate at this level while you learn about the tournament circuit and how it all works.
- It's a good starting point to get into the fishing industry.
- We don't have to compete against the pros - we are competing against other co-anglers that have about the same skill sets.



### **The Cons of Being a Co-Angler**

- Sometimes a co-angler is mistaken as an amateur when we are not.
- The payouts are less (but that's to be expected since our entry fees are less).
- We are at the mercy of the Pro - it's the luck of the draw. We have to go where the pro goes and work the back of the boat - and fish "used" water.
- Our points and where we are in the standings has everything (well maybe 95%) to do with the pro we draw. We have little control of our destiny.
- We often get ignored in the press.
- There may be a technique we used in pre-fishing that worked for us but the pro is not fishing that technique and we have to adjust to how they are fishing.
- We don't get to have a say in the places we go to fish - and sometimes I don't like where or how they are fishing - especially if I have pre-fished and caught fish a certain way and they are not on a pattern and we are not catching anything. That can be very disappointing.
- We have to condense our tackle we carry on board the boat - we have a limited amount of space in which to sit in and fish in.
- We have to rely on the boating skills of the pro, whether they know how to run the boat or not. I have felt very unsafe at times and that scares me. Some of these ladies don't know how to operate their boat.
- Sometimes we have to be their GPS and help them navigate the lake if they are not familiar with how to run it (which I have had happen on more than one occasion).

### **How Do I Prepare for a Tournament?**

I prepare for each tournament differently. I try to do research on each lake on the tour and prepare my equipment according to the lake I will be fishing. I would like to think that I try to prepare for each lake

just like a pro would, except that I don't hire a guide to show me the lake. I purchase a map of each lake so that I will know how the channels and buoy markers run and know the layout of the lake before I even get on the water. I only have 5 rods and reels so I try and decide what techniques I will be using and rig them accordingly. I usually try and re-spool my line before I get to a lake in order to cut down on preparation time once I arrive. I have to condense my tackle and decide on what to take and what to leave behind. I also pack according to the time of year. I always carry a rain suit, but I only carry heavy clothing if I think it will be cold. I have made myself a checklist according to each lake so that I don't forget anything. I try not to carry more than I need because I usually share a ride with another angler and I don't want to over load the boat or the back of the truck with unnecessary items.

Another way I prepare for each tournament before I ever leave the house is I get three envelopes (one for each day of fishing) and I put in my boater gas money and a business card with my cell phone number on it. Once I arrive at my hotel, I take a hotel business card and put my room number I am staying in on the back. That way after the draw meeting, I can grab the Day 1 envelope and present it to my pro. It makes everything very easy for her to access all my contact information. I then take Day2 envelope with me in my tackle so I will have it handy after weigh-in to give to my Day 2 pro. Same thing for Day 3 (I try to be optimistic that I will be fishing on Day 3).

I get migraines easily so I try to have medicine on board and enough snacks, water and Gatorade for the day so I won't loose any fishing time due to a migraine.

### **Being on Someone Else's Boat**

I find it an honor each time I set foot on a pro's boat so I try to treat their boat as I would want my boat treated. I try to be considerate and not step in their seats, I don't leave trash on their boat and I always try to be ready to move when they are. I always want to be helpful in any way I can to them. I offer to help them launch their boat and park their truck and trailer and load the boat afterward if they are traveling alone. I always offer to get ice, water or anything like that we will most likely need for the day and I try to leave the boat in better shape than when I got on board.

I have to condense my tackle and I try not to take too much on board since space for a co-angler is limited. I always have my camera, but I like to ask permission first before I bring it on board. I have only had one pro that does not allow a camera on her boat during a tournament because of superstition. I also always ask permission to take their photo - some pros don't want their photo taken.

I only take the terminal tackle I think I will need for that day and the baits I think I will be throwing. I will most always offer my baits to the pro if they are working for me.

I always ask the pro if they want me to net their fish for them. Some do, others don't. And I always ask my pro if they can swim. I can swim, but I am afraid of the water. I don't want to be in the water unless it is absolutely necessary. I am also a quiet, reserved person, especially when I fish so I tell my pro not to take it personal if I don't talk much while I am fishing.



## What Basic Techniques Work for Me at Each Tournament

These are the basic techniques that usually work for me at each and every tournament I fish:

- Texas Rig (weighted or weightless)
- Carolina Rig
- Spinner Bait

I only have 5 rods and reels and I have certain rods and reels I always rig with those techniques. I normally change out the other two to either be a crank bait, a jig, a shaky head or a wacky rig depending on how my pro will be fishing. I have certain "go-to" baits that I can throw that will usually tell me what the fish are doing and how I need to adjust. I can always peg my Texas rig if I need an instant Carolina rig.



The 2007 WBT season I started keeping a fishing journal. I have pages for each lake we will be fishing so that when I research a lake, I will write down what time of year the tournament will be, what techniques are working for that lake. I add to it as I go along. After each tournament I review the information and log what baits and techniques worked for me, for my pro and what others were using and what won the tournament. I also write down how I placed on each day of the tournament and what my weight was. That way, if I get to fish that lake again, I can refer back to my notes and adjust accordingly. It has been a helpful tool for me this year. This only helps to a certain degree because as a co-angler I am at the mercy of my pro. If my pro is on fish, then all is good. If my pro is struggling, chances are, I will be struggling too.

### My Most Memorable Moment - Good (to date)

My most memorable happy moment fishing the WBT was making the top 6 with my sister at Lake Norman in 2006. I can remember being so tired after day 2. It was very hot that day on the water and I had gotten dehydrated and wasn't feeling very well. I never thought I would ever have a chance to fish on day 3, but after weigh-in on day 2 my sister came over to where I was resting in the shade and told me that we both had qualified to fish on Day 3. I could hardly believe it. I can remember being so happy and so upset at the same time. I was happy for the fact that we had both qualified, but upset that I was so exhausted that I thought there was no way I would be physically able to fish a third day. After getting back to the hotel, resting, replacing fluids and getting a good meal, it then hit me. I was so excited to have made it to Day 3 and with my sister. I fished with Sheri Glasgow and I didn't bring in any fish, but I still made 5th place. It continues to be my incentive to be the best angler I can be and strive for my first win. I think before that moment, I was just fishing.

### My Most Memorable Moment - Bad (to date)

My most memorable bad moment had to have been this last tournament at Kentucky. Going into this tournament I was sitting in 21st place overall. On day 1, around 11:00 a.m. our boat broke down and we were robbed of almost two and a half hours of fishing and we had to be towed in. I felt sorry for my pro because of the breakdown and she felt sorry for me because she knew I needed to bring in fish in order to keep my points. There was nothing either of us could do. That's fishing.

## One Last Thing

I have pre-fished with several pros over the last two years and that has been very helpful to me to learn the lake and the water we will be fishing. However, I have fished a tournament where a pro has asked me if I had any spots to go to. I have never given up any pros spots to another pro. I don't think it is appropriate for a pro to even ask that question and I don't think it is appropriate for a co-angler to give up another pro's spots. That puts a co-angler in a very awkward position and I don't like being put in that situation. The pro has every opportunity to learn the lake just like everyone else and put together a fishing pattern on their own. As a co-angler, I have high expectations and I expect the pro I draw to know the lake, have a pattern going and be on fish.

I still have lots to learn and I always learn something at each tournament and from each pro I fish with that I can take with me. I hope to work on learning the many other aspects of fishing such as locating the fish, learning their feeding patterns and so forth. I love to fish and I love it that there are other women out there that I can associate with that I can share the sport with. The WBT is a great place to be and a great venue for all women anglers - both pro and co. I look for the 2008 season to be bigger and better than any of us can imagine.

The most difficult part of being a co-angler is not being able to go where you know the fish are. All in all, being a co-angler means you have to be prepared for anything and be able to adjust to whatever your pro has planned for that day. The pro has everything to do with our success and we must show them the respect that they deserve. My goal is to earn a good reputation as a respectful, trustworthy co-angler among my peers.

