

GRANTLAND

FISHING

The Weight of Guilt

Death, disgrace, and a handful of knockers: inside the secret world of competitive bass fishing cheaters.

BY DAVID HILL ON DECEMBER 2, 2014



Danny Ray Davis wasn't just a fisherman, he was a champion. You'd know that had you ever seen him around Grand Prairie, Texas. They say he always wore the prize "\$50,000 Winner" silk jacket he got for taking down the 1983 Texarkana Labor Day bass tournament. Davis was known as someone with a lot of luck out on the water and not much luck in the rest of his life. By 1984, he was 33 years old and had been divorced four times. His body was badly burned in an explosion while he was on the job as an electrician with Dallas Power & Light. The injuries caused extensive nerve damage and scarring. He said he learned to fish to regain the use of his hands after the accident. Fishing was one of the few things that brought him some much-needed joy, not to mention some much-needed money. In the spring of 1984, Davis caught an 8.7-pound bass in the KYKX Big Bass Classic. It wasn't big enough to stuff and mount on the wall, but it was big enough to qualify for the \$105,000 first prize. Winning two major bass fishing tournaments in less than a year? He was lucky. He was ecstatic. He was in deep shit.

The contest judges raised questions about the 8.7-pounder and a number of other fish that had been caught in the tournament. They disqualified six contestants, including Davis. Turned out Davis had been under suspicion for a while in Texas. He had routinely failed the polygraph tests given to winners of tournaments. (He blamed his nerves from the accident).¹ The guy who won the Big Bass Classic the year before, Gary

Parkerson, confessed to cheating in that event. In fact, he didn't even know how to fish; Parkerson told the police he had never even put a hook in the water.

¹ *Polygraphs are commonly used in bass fishing tournaments as a deterrent to cheating. Typically, anyone who wins money is subjected to a polygraph test to determine if he or she actually caught the fish that was turned in. Occasionally, a random contestant will also be polygraphed. The tests are usually administered by local law enforcement.*

Now the police were setting their sights on Davis. They wanted him to come up to Tyler, Texas, to testify in front of a grand jury. They suspected that both Davis and Parkerson were part of a bass-fishing cheating ring that stretched from Florida to Texas. A Louisiana State Police officer involved in the investigation told reporters that "some of the individuals involved could try to retaliate against witnesses. They have ties to types who could do away with you if they wanted to."²

² *From "Texas Bass Wars: Big Trouble Over Little Fish," Motor Boating & Sailing Magazine, December 1984.*

Davis asked his dad, Oris Davis, to go with him to Tyler. According to Oris, Danny Ray was scared. "He told me that if he testified," Oris Davis says, "he was a dead man."

Danny Ray's grand jury testimony was set for Wednesday, August 29, 1984. On Tuesday, a neighbor found him on the banks of a gravel pit lake near his family home, a shotgun blast blown right through his head.

I'm huddled in between the seats on an 18-foot Triton TR186 bass boat on a frigid November afternoon. The driver of this boat, a 42-year-old angler named Keith Cleary, tells me that the boat can do over 50 mph. It feels like it's doing every one of those miles at once as we skip on top of the waves of Candlewood Lake near Danbury, Connecticut. We are among some 20 other boats entered in a weekend tournament sponsored by The Bass Federation (TBF) of Connecticut. It's a decent turnout for a small club during the winter, but this is what they call "the money run" — the cold weather means that even though the fish are biting, the weak of heart stay home. The end of the year is when the best teams can clean up. Some competitors haul their boats from as far away as New Jersey in search of easy money. Today the winner will take home more than a grand.

Cleary is the tournament director for this club, but he's also a serious competitor. He's made TBF nationals three years in a row and this year qualified for the Walmart Bass Fishing League All-American Championship. He's been so focused on running a good event, racing around boat to boat dealing with different tasks, that he doesn't think he's caught enough today to be in contention for the money. So we're hauling ass to make up for lost time.

Cleary's partner is Louis Hacaj, an old friend from Yonkers, where they both grew up fishing out of rowboats in reservoirs and organizing paper tournaments among kids from the neighborhood. Hacaj doesn't usually fish tournaments. He's just here for some quality time with his buddy. But when Cleary yells, "Fish on!" Hacaj drops his reel, grabs his net, and leaps to the other end of the boat without hesitation.

Cleary doesn't yell, "Fish on!" very often today. But that's not unusual. Fishing is defined by its long stretches of boredom punctuated by a few brief, thrilling moments of excitement. Two guys on a boat

floating in the water talking shit. The repetition of the cast. The sound of the line spinning on the reel as the lure flies out over the still waters. A plop, a click, and the winding of the handle until the lure returns to the pole to be cast again. It goes on and on like this, for hours. If I weren't the type of New Yorker who could appreciate the pastoral beauty of a country lake or the peacefulness of floating on water, I suppose bass fishing could feel downright Sisyphean.

But then there comes a moment when a fish finds that lure and bites down upon it, and there's a tug on the line, a signal that lights up every nerve in Keith Cleary's body. He gently pulls back to be sure that what's got his lure is a living creature, something that can respond with some kind of movement. And then the fight begins.

It isn't a violent fight. It's more martial art than backstreet brawl. A dance. You don't just pull the fish in with all your might. That's a sure way to break your line and let the fish escape. You bring him in a little, gently, then let him swim away a bit. Then you bring him back the other way. You have to coax the fish to the boat. There's a rhythm to this. He's going to fight you for sure. You just let him. A lot of this is feel. You need to know when to reel, when to turn your body, when to jerk and how hard, get that hook set just right and move the fish at just the right speed so that your line, whatever weight it may be, can stand the struggle. Before long that fish will quit, surrender. And that's when Louis gets the net in the water to make sure nothing stupid happens at the end, like a fish shaking free while dangling from the pole at the side of the boat.

I ask Keith and Louis if anyone ever cheats at these events. They laugh. No, nobody has ever been caught cheating at a TBF event that they've heard of. There are rumors sometimes, like the time someone found a barrel full of fish in the water. Keith thought it maybe belonged to someone who caught herring to sell. But some were convinced it was there to store bass until the day of a tournament. Keith thought that sounded far-fetched.

"People don't cheat in these events," he tells me. "There's just not enough money on the line."

How much money would need to be on the line for someone to cheat, I wonder. Cleary casts his line out, spins around in his tall chair at the front of the boat, and smiles like he has a whopper of a tale to tell.

"Well, there was this one guy out in California I heard about ... "

Around the time that Danny Ray Davis turned up dead, Mike Hart and his wife, Yolanda, entered their first bass fishing tournament. They were out on Castaic Lake, just north of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, where they both had grown up and met as childhood sweethearts. The couple had been bass fishing for about two years at that point. Mike got interested in it first, having been dragged out to Castaic by a friend with whom he used to trout fish. They fished from the banks of the lake by the boat launch ramp; neither of them owned a boat. "I probably caught like 50 fish that day," Mike says.

Mike and Yolanda were into the outdoors and sports. Like many people in the Valley, they grew up surfing. They were also serious about archery, a sport for which Mike's family was well known. Mike was a state archery champion at the age of 15.³ After high school, he got caught up in the racquetball craze of the '80s and worked his way up to the Open Pro Division. But after that day on the banks of Castaic Lake, the surfboards, the rackets, and the arrows all went in the closet to gather dust. If it was possible to be addicted

to something like bass fishing, Mike Hart was bad sick.

³ *As a kid, he combined his love of archery and fishing by shooting carp at Big Bear Lake with a bow and arrow. He taught himself how to adjust his aim to make up for the refraction in the water.*

Hart fished off the banks every day for five months before he decided to buy a boat. Even though he caught only one fish on his first day with his new boat, his obsession did not subside. He sought advice from others. "We tried to find clubs to join, but we couldn't find any," Hart says. "It was a struggle trying to figure out how these guys were catching these fish. It's a weird thing. Especially in SoCal. People don't want to talk about how they're doing it. They don't want to share their secrets, so it's very hard to learn unless you just go do it yourself." Back in 1984, in the absence of any clubs to join, Mike and Yolanda Hart entered their first tournament instead. They didn't catch a single fish.

Here's how most bass fishing tournaments work: Contestants (either as individuals or in teams of two) set out on a lake at the same time to fish wherever they want for a certain period of time. At the end of the time limit, everyone rides back in and weighs the fish they caught. There's usually a limit on how many fish you can weigh in. If you catch your limit and then catch an even bigger fish, you can let one go and replace it with the bigger fish. Whoever checks in with the biggest weight of their total haul of fish wins the prize. Sometimes there's an additional prize for the lunker, the biggest single fish caught that day.

The modern bass fishing tournament is largely the brainchild of an Alabama insurance salesman named Ray Scott. In 1967, Scott organized the first big-time bass fishing tournament on Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas. The entry fee was \$100 a person. That sum was unheard of in the sport of fishing, and very few people believed he would get the 100 entries Scott had promised his sponsors. In 1967, bass fishing didn't have the same esteemed reputation as fly fishing. Bass anglers were mainly Southerners, country boys perhaps as misunderstood and stereotyped as the "trash fish" they pursued — slow-moving, still-water fish with gigantic mouths and even bigger bellies who lay around in the muddy bottoms of warm-water lakes.⁴ Up until Scott's 1967 All-American Invitational Bass Tournament, most bass fishing contests were local "fishing derbies" with \$2 entry fees. It was hard to get folks to pony up more than that back then. Especially since, according to Scott, the money just went to "the guy who has the most pounds of fish stored up in his freezer." The assumption back then was that everyone cheated. Winning meant you cheated the best without getting caught. In those days, "cheating was almost synonymous with fishing," Scott says.

⁴ *Here's how fisherman Charles Hallock described bass in his 1873 work *The Fishing Tourist*: "Not to say that all fish that inhabit clear and sparkling waters are game fish: for there are many such, of symmetrical form and delicate flavor, that take neither bait nor fly. But it is self-evident that no fish which inhabit foul or sluggish waters can be 'game fish.' It is impossible from the very circumstance of their surroundings and associations. They may flash with tinsel and tawdry attire; they may strike with the brute force of a blacksmith, or exhibit the dexterity of a prize-fighter, but their low breeding and vulgar quality cannot be mistaken. Their haunts, their very food and manner of eating, betray their grossness."*

Ray Scott was bedeviled by this reputation. He knew that there were honest, talented bass fishers out there, and he had ideas about how to weed out the cheaters and attract only the best. The first thing he reckoned was that if you made the buy-in a serious amount, only serious fishermen would enter. And he had some

ideas for ground rules that he hoped would keep the cheaters at home and give the honest folks some peace of mind.

The most important of these rules: While some fish alone, those seeking a partner would be randomly paired up with competitors in the same boat. Most contests let buddies fish together. Scott's would have competitors keeping a close eye on each other. In fact, he wouldn't even pair up contestants from the same city. And his rules stated that contestants (and their fish) always had to stay within sight of their partners at all times.

"Why do fishermen cheat?" Ray Scott asks me. He's sitting in his office at Presidents Lake, the 55-acre private lake he has built near his hometown of Montgomery, Alabama,⁵ nearly 50 years after he organized that first tournament. "He wants to stand bigger and taller than the other boys he knows, that's why.

⁵ *Presidents Lake has hosted both the junior and the elder Presidents Bass and many of the best bass fishermen in history. It costs nearly \$1,500 a person for a weekend of fishing. Outdoor Life magazine once called it "arguably the best little bass pond on the planet."*

"My primary motivation in 1967 was because I had seen cheating, or a very easy opportunity to cheat, in these events where you win a shotgun or a fishing pole or whatever. These guys didn't care about the shotguns or the fishing poles or anything else. He'll do anything to shine. I accept that. That's a natural motivation. That's why I wrote rules to take care of that guy."

When Scott reached out to invite fishermen to the 1967 event, he stressed that it was open only to the best, and that included character. "I don't want anyone who's not a top-flight bass fisherman," he'd tell them. "We're looking, as well, for fine men who have outstanding character, who are honest and a credit to bass fishing." The first fella to hear Ray Scott's sales pitch and hand over \$100 described himself as "Lunker Leo Welch, Burlington's Biggest Bomber Bass Boy." Scott wanted character; what he got were characters. The two weren't mutually exclusive. He got 106 entrants from 13 states, many of whom went on to become national stars in the burgeoning sport.

The success of the event earned national media attention and sparked the formation of the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society⁶ and with it the Bassmaster National Tournament Trail. Bass fishing would explode in popularity through the 1970s and '80s. The image of the bass fisher as a slack-jawed hayseed was replaced by professional tournament anglers in sunglasses and jerseys with corporate sponsors and fast, fancy boats. The attention that tournament bass fishing got showed the sporting public that bass fishing required talent and a good deal of technique. Thanks to Ray Scott, the men and women who chased the "trash fish" got some much-deserved respect. Thousands of people were flocking to the sport, eager to learn all they could.

⁶ *Today, BASS has more than a half million members. It publishes the magazine Bassmaster and produces a weekly syndicated television program, Bassmasters, and the championship event of its tournament series, the Bassmaster Classic, is widely considered to be the Super Bowl of bass fishing.*

Mike Hart was one of those people. He spent the rest of the '80s and '90s doing nothing but fishing, determined to get better. He was addicted. It was all he could think about while he sat at his job at a local print shop in the San Fernando Valley. For the better part of the next decade, Hart fished almost every

single weekend and during the summers another four or five days a week. He'd go straight from work to Castaic Lake. He wrote everything down — weather, where the fish were, how he caught them, how deep they were, what type of line he used and how it performed, every single detail on every single day he fished. Year after year, this homework came in handy. He'd discover that bass were creatures of habit. On the same day each year he could count on them going to the same spots and doing the same things they had the years before.

He'd teach himself about how to read shadows on the surface of the water, how to sit on the boat and how to hold his rod so that if he hooked a fish he'd be most comfortable swinging it the right way. He considered every minute detail that could come into play during a tournament and practiced various methods to deal with different contingencies. That was the key, he realized. He had to be able to adapt to win a tournament, because the events are won by ounces, not pounds, and little things made a big difference between first and second place. If Hart was the only guy worried about the little things that might make a small difference here and there, over the long run he'd win more than his share of events.

And win he did. By the '90s, Hart was entering events almost every weekend for \$200 to \$300 a pop and competing for prizes from \$1,500 to \$3,000. He won nine of these in a row at one point, including one weekend event with 150 boats when he caught a 12.5-pound bass and took down more than \$8,000. In 1996 he won his first Angler of the Year title. During the next 15 years, in multiple lakes and divisions, he would win nearly 30 more.

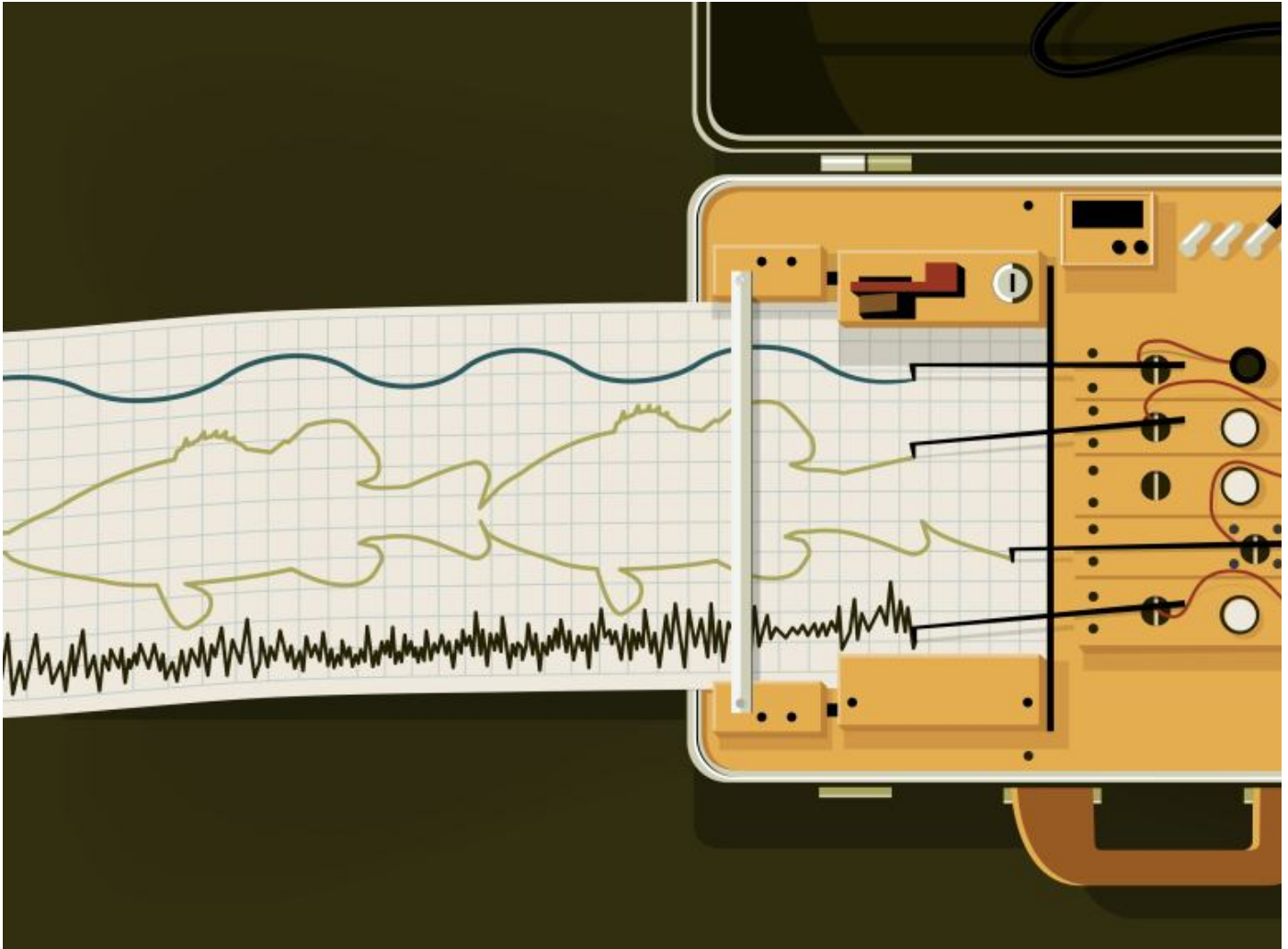


ILLUSTRATION BY John Tomac

Elro Vernon McNeil and Fred Scheen Jr. were on their way from St. Cloud, Florida, to Tyler, Texas, when they stopped off in Bossier City, Louisiana. They needed to run a quick errand at McNeil's place and then they'd get back on the road to Texas in time for the 1983 Texas Bass Association's Roadrunner Bass Tournament.

Neither of the men were entered in the tournament. But they had a serious rooting interest in someone who was. Terry Isam, from Longview, Texas, was an acquaintance of McNeil's, and Isam had agreed to split whatever money he won in the event with him. All McNeil had to do was give Isam this enormous black bass that he and Scheen had bought in South Florida. The only problem was, the thing was frozen solid. So they stopped off at McNeil's house to try to thaw the thing out in his bathtub before they got back on the road.

Eventually, McNeil would rig his truck with an aerated tank so he could haul the bass from Florida to Texas while they were still alive. But in April 1983, McNeil was still working out the kinks of what would become a \$350,000 heist on the Texas bass fishing circuit.

Over the next year and a half, Elro McNeil would work with more than a half-dozen different fishermen to take down the top prizes in nearly every big bass fishing tournament in Texas. This would be the last time he would work with Terry Isam, but it wouldn't be the last time he'd see him. After Danny Ray Davis turned up

dead the following August, investigators would soon turn to Isam to help them build their case against McNeil and the rest of the cheating ring. Isam agreed to testify in exchange for lesser charges. He would be the federal government's star witness.

Meanwhile Davis's death was being investigated as a homicide. An unnamed government witness was quoted in the press as saying he "wouldn't live until sundown" if the ring discovered he was cooperating with authorities. The witness told the investigators he was "having trouble living with himself" since getting involved with McNeil and that he wanted to "clear his conscience" and "turn his life around."

By the early aughts, Hart was one of the top anglers in California on the WON Bass circuit.⁷ But he still was earning only maybe about \$8,000 a year after expenses, not enough to leave his day job. Still, as he racked up tournament after tournament, he couldn't help but wonder whether he was good enough to fish on the professional circuit nationally and do it for a living. By 2010, Hart had earned more than \$200,000 in fishing tournaments. He was close to breaking through to the next level, and he had a plan. He persuaded a friend to stake him the entry fee and expenses to fish in the 2010 WON Bass U.S. Open at Lake Mead near Nevada. Cash prize: \$100,000.

⁷ *WON Bass is the Western Outdoor News bass organization. It publishes a weekly hunting and fishing publication and sponsors a number of tournaments, the largest of which is the U.S. Open.*

If Hart could score big at the U.S. Open, then he figured he and his backer would have the bankroll and the confidence to light out and hit the road and fish tournaments full-time. In Hart's mind, all the work he had put in for the last 25 years came down to this moment, this event. The stakes were high. The temperature was even higher.

Lake Mead in July 2010 was mind-bogglingly hot. The temperature during the U.S. Open topped 120 degrees. During the event, 10 different fishermen were sent to the hospital with symptoms of heat exhaustion. The fish would fare no better. On Day 2, Hart was riding back in after catching his limit for the day. The ride was long, about 40 minutes. On the way back, he looked in his boat's livewell,⁸ and his stomach tightened. Three of his fish were belly-up.

⁸ *A livewell is a compartment in a bass boat in which to store fish and keep them alive. Water is pumped in the livewell from beneath the boat — the temperature is controlled and the fish inside are aerated.*

It was the fall of 1971 in Aspen, Colorado. Ray Scott was standing in a narrow mountain stream surrounded by more than a dozen fishermen in waders flicking cane poles back and forth and tapping the surface of the stream with their lures. This was not Ray Scott's scene, normally. He didn't know all there was to know about fly fishing, but he knew enough to know it wasn't for him. He failed to appreciate the beauty in the centuries-old tradition. "These guys waded out there in that water with these big rubber britches and their costumes, with all kinds of implements and gadgets fixed all over them."

Yet here he was, fly fishing in the mountains at the annual conclave of what was then known as the Federation of Fly Fishermen. The group had asked Scott to come out and speak to them about conservation, an issue that Scott and BASS had been focusing on.⁹ They wanted to hear more about Scott's views on water pollution and political activism. They ended up teaching him a lesson that would change the sport of bass

fishing forever.

⁹ From 1970 to 1971, Scott and BASS filed more than 200 lawsuits against various companies, claiming they were violating the 1899 Refuse Act by dumping waste into rivers, lakes, and streams. Scott appeared regularly on national television to speak out in support of clean water and to encourage outdoor enthusiasts to shame polluters. He won the respect of many of the old-school, hoity-toity outdoors groups. When a member of the Federation of Fly Fishermen heard Scott speak at the meeting of the Outdoor Writers Association of America about the responsibility of hunters and anglers to work for conservation, he invited Scott to the conclave.

Scott was standing in the water, snapping that rod, when he heard someone holler. Everyone around him rushed over toward the fisherman who cried out. He had snagged a fish and was fighting to reel it in. Another fisherman grabbed a net and helped him out, scooping up the trout and bringing it to the one who'd snagged it, who in turn produced a little tool from a compartment on his vest and carefully worked the hook out of the trout's mouth. Scott couldn't believe it. It was a small fish, maybe a foot in length, nothing like the enormous five- and 10-pound largemouth bass he was used to battling with on the lake. But just when Ray Scott thought he had seen it all, the fisherman bent over with the fish and carefully released it back into the river. After all that work, all that ruckus, he just let it go. The assembled fishermen let up a whoop and slapped each other on the backs. *What a bunch of freaks.*

"On the flight home in the cheap seats, I kept replaying that incident," Scott said. "At first I thought it was silly. But then I realized we are catching tons of these bass in our tournaments, and not a damn one of 'em lives to breathe another breath when we're done with 'em." It dawned on Scott — they were going to fish themselves right out of business. When he got home, he told the staff of BASS that he was amending the rulebook. Everyone was to bring the fish back alive. If they brought one back dead, they'd be penalized four ounces from that fish's weight.

The change in the rules would lead to innovations in the sport that would last until the present day. Today, "catch and release" is standard in every fishing tournament in the country, from the Bassmaster Classic to local weekend events. In the 2010 WON Bass U.S. Open, a dead fish carried a 3.2-ounce penalty.

Mike Hart quickly did the math in his head. Three dead fish equaled 9.6 ounces. That was more than half a pound. In his last tournament, he'd lost his shot at a boat and \$40,000 by only four ounces. He knew this was going to knock him out of contention. *How the hell am I going to make this weight up?*

Whenever I told friends of mine I was working on a story about cheating at bass fishing, they always asked the same thing: *How in the world do you cheat at bass fishing?* Let me count the ways, I'd tell them.

By far, the most common way people cheat is to store a fish basket or pet taxi under a dock, filled with lunkers they'd caught before the event, and then retrieve the fish while they were supposed to be out fishing. A variation on this would be to attach a string to a stump in the water and hook various fish to the string. This way allows fishermen to retrieve the fish while faking that they actually caught them, just in case they were paired up in the boat with a competitor. There was the story that Ray Scott told me about a man who showed up for a tournament wearing a full-length raincoat even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky — his partner later discovered the man had a string of bass draped around his neck. There was the guy in the U.K. who last year won a bass fishing tournament with a 13-pounder, only to have the second-place finisher

recognize the giant bass from a recent trip he had taken to the local aquarium with his daughter. They called the aquarium and, sure enough, it was missing a big bass. People have been caught buying fish off of noncompetitors on the lake during an event, or sharing fish between colluding teams.

There are a lot of ways to sneak a big fish into a tournament and act like you just caught it. But what does a person do when they find themselves just a few ounces shy, mere minutes from maybe the most important weigh-in of their life? What would a heretofore honest person do if he were convinced — in the fog of 122-degree heat — that he was face-to-face with his own ruin? What would he do if he were desperate enough to make a Robert Johnson—esque deal with the devil to make that weight up just this one time, that weight he caught fair and square anyway?

Hart looked in his tackle box and saw a handful of knockers, the little torpedo-shaped weights he used to slide down his line and knock lures off of branches or whatever they were stuck on underwater. He thought, *This could be enough weight*. He didn't spend too much time deliberating. In a panic, he picked up the first dead fish and held open its mouth. He dropped the knocker down the hole.

Everything changed for Hart in that moment. He didn't get away with it, of course. And according to WON Bass, when Hart showed up the following day to weigh in five more fish, there were knockers in those fish as well. He was charged with disorderly conduct and paid a \$1,000 fine. He received a lifetime ban from fishing in WON Bass events, and all of his many titles over the years were wiped from the record books. The story was national news, and shortly after it broke, he was let go from the job at the print shop he had held for 25 years, which Hart attributes to the attention from his cheating. His wife, Yolanda, was laid off from her own job soon after that. Hart's daughter fell ill and began suffering stress-related seizures. Death threats against him were posted on fishing message boards. His friends were told they weren't allowed to enter tournaments if they had been seen fishing with him. Every partner he had ever fished with was brought under scrutiny, some forced to submit to polygraph exams to keep their titles and records. He and his wife have avoided Castaic after hearing that friends of theirs were harassed out on the lake for standing by them. Now the couple rarely fish at all, and never on public lakes. They just finished short-selling their home. Today, Hart cleans pools for a living. When he spoke to me for this article, he was in the process of selling his Ranger Comanche Z520 bass boat. He had been out on it only four times in the past four years. He's trying to move on with his life. "Karma is a thing," he said. "Karma is a big deal."

Hart insists he had never cheated before the 2010 WON Bass U.S. Open, that every record he set and his more than 100 tournament wins before the open were legitimate. Maybe that's true, and maybe it isn't. He isn't interested in trying to convince anyone. He says he doesn't want anyone to feel sorry for him. He says he deserves what he got. Maybe even worse, he says. Because WON Bass confronted him and disqualified him before actually weighing his fish and awarding him any prize money, Hart says it missed an opportunity to charge him with a more serious crime. He says that he's relieved the organization didn't hand him a check, but that tournament directors should pay people they suspect of cheating so they can then seek the maximum penalties.

Hart knows that he can't undo what he did. He's embarrassed and ashamed. Because he was caught cheating, yes. But also because he thought he was ready for the next level of competition, and he was wrong. "I'm disappointed in myself more than anything.

"It's hard not to fish anymore because it was so much a part of my life," Hart says. "They all want to condemn me or whatever. But I did it to myself. I live the misery every day."

On December 11, 1984, 31-year-old Elro McNeil and three other men pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to conspiracy to defraud and were sent to prison for the maximum term of five years for their roles in cheating fishing tournaments in Texas and Louisiana. Before sentencing, McNeil told the judge that he "realized my mistake and this whole thing has really messed up my life." He denied he was motivated by greed. He said it was his competitive nature that compelled him to cheat.

Terry Isam served six months in prison for cheating in the Tyler Roadrunner Bass Tournament after his plea agreement with the U.S. Attorney's office. After that, he was in and out of jail for the next couple of years. In 1988, after a short stint for assault, Isam died from a gunshot wound to the chest. He had a long rap sheet at the Gregg County Courthouse, including drug possession charges, but some wondered if his fears of retribution had come true.

None of the men were ever accused of any involvement in Danny Ray Davis's death, which was ruled a suicide by the Dallas County Medical Examiner. Oris Davis refuses to accept that his son committed suicide. For one thing, he doesn't believe that Danny Ray would do such a thing at the lake where he loved to fish. "He loved that place better than any place in the world," Oris says. "That would be the last place I'd expect him to do it."

At the weigh-in after the Candlewood event in Connecticut, as each pair of fishermen came lumbering up the boat ramp with their big bags full of flopping fish, I couldn't help but wonder, *Are any of these guys cheating? Do any of these fish have lead in their bellies? Did anyone sneak a fish in a basket?* There was no way to know. This was largely a fraternity of men who knew and trusted each other. And though there was some money on the line, most of these guys were just out to have a nice day on the lake in communion with God's creation.

Each team waited its turn to pile its haul of fish on the digital scale in a patch of grass near the boat ramp. Someone from The Bass Federation recorded the weights from the big LED scoreboard into a notebook, working through the long line of anglers methodically, professionally, clinically. After each team weighed its fish, the members would walk back down the boat ramp and pour the bag of bass out into the lake to swim free.

After a while, I noticed the seagulls and fish crows gathering in the treetops above us. I looked down the hill at the lake below and saw Louis Hacaj standing on the embankment. He was watching a fish flopping around in the water on its side, having recently been released by another fisherman. Soon Hacaj was joined by Steve Bender, the winner of that day's tournament, who brought with him a "hypo," a long needle also called a Bends Mender, which fishermen use to puncture the air bladder of a bloated fish to allow it to descend back into the water.

The fish had floated too far from shore to reach. The birds gathering above were just waiting for it to finish flopping, to signal that it had given up, before they swooped in for the kill. Hacaj waded out into the freezing lake, soaking his clothes, and came back with the bloated fish in his hands. Bender held the fish's mouth open and went to work with the hypo like a surgeon as Hacaj watched. "I've never done it through the mouth

before," Hacaj said.

"It's better this way," Bender replied. "It's pretty cool. Just listen and you can hear the air come in." They hushed as Bender prodded in the fish's throat. Then — a hiss. Bender pointed the fish's head down into the water and let it slip between his hands and away into the deep of the lake, alive and well.

"You're gonna catch that fish next year and it will be nine pounds," Hacaj joked.

Bender shrugged. "I just hate seeing them go belly-up like that."

Over our heads, one by one, the fish crows set out and flew away.