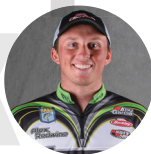


Cody Huff Josh Douglas Joseph Webster Alex Redwine Jacob Foutz Your Daisuke Aoki 2022 Rookie Class



The freshmen on the Elite Series who will be competing for the Falcon Rods Rookie of the Year title may be the most eclectic group ever to graduate to the big leagues in the same year

By MARK HICKS

QUALIFYING FOR THE Bassmaster Elite Series, the pinnacle of professional fishing, is not easy. As a matter of fact, it can take decades depending on which path you take. Still, the arrival is noteworthy. Ten anglers are walking across the big stage for the first time this year. Although their backgrounds are varied, their drive to succeed is nonstop, and each has a level of skill for bass fishing that is uncanny. As you read how they arrived at the summit, commit their names to memory. Some, if not all, will become household names in our sport. It will be a real treat watching them compete to earn that stardom.

Matty Wong

Californian Matty Wong may be the most diverse individual to ever compete as a Bassmaster Elite Series angler. He fished his first club event in 2018. Three years later, he won the B.A.S.S. Nation National Championship. His winnings include berths in the 2022 Bassmaster Classic and the Elite Series, \$20,000 cash and the use of a fully rigged bass boat for the 2022 season.

Wong was born in Hawaii. His father attended college in California, where he befriended Bob Grbac, who got him hooked on bass fishing.

After his father graduated, he settled back home in



Photo: Brenden Kanies

Joseph Webster

In 2019, Alabamian Joseph Webster competed in the Bassmaster Central Opens with the goal of finishing among the Top 3 in the Angler of the Year standings and qualifying for the Elite Series. He made the Top 20 in three of the four events but wound up eighth in Angler of the Year points due to a 69th-place finish at the upper Mississippi River.

“It broke my heart,” Webster said. “I was so upset I sat out the Opens the next year.”

However, he continued to compete in the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit. He made that tour’s championship for five consecutive years and pocketed nearly \$400,000 while doing so.

“But I’d much rather be an Elite Series angler,” Webster said. “I decided to give it another go in 2021.”

The Central Opens 2021 schedule encouraged Webster to try again. Two of the events were slated for Pickwick and Lewis Smith lakes. Webster lives 40 minutes from each lake. He made good use of his home-field advantage, finishing fifth at Pickwick and 16th at Lewis Smith.

At the third stop of the season, Webster took 38th place on Grand Lake and landed at fourth in the Central Opens Angler of the Year standings. As Jacob Powroznik double-qualified, the Elite invitation moved down to Webster.

Wester was introduced to bass fishing early in life by his father, Randy, and grandfather Bob. Both competed regularly in local tournaments.

“My dad and grandfather threw nothing but spinner-baits,” Webster said. “I still fish shallow. That’s where my heart is. But when it comes to winning money, I’m usually fishing off the bank.”

Photo: James Overstreet

Hawaii and put a cane pole in Wong’s hands as soon as he was big enough to hold it. They often fished nearby Lake Wilson for tilapia, largemouth bass and peacock bass.

At age 6, Wong proudly displayed the B.A.S.S. sticker on his little orange tacklebox. A few years later, he practiced for hours in the front yard with a baitcasting outfit to learn how to cast without backlash.

After high school, Wong earned an associate’s degree from Oahu’s Kapiolani Community College and went to film school at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. At age 25, he moved to Hollywood to find where his talents would take him. He aspired to be an actor.

In October 2018, he joined the Ventura County Bass Club because it was affiliated with B.A.S.S. Nation.

“The club’s members are great guys who love to share information and teach,” Wong said.

In 2020, Wong qualified for California’s B.A.S.S. Nation state team. He relied on a jerkbait and swimbaits to finish third at the regional on Arizona’s Lake Havasu. That earned a berth in the 2021 B.A.S.S. Nation Championship on the Ouachita River in Louisiana.

Wong targeted cypress trees and stumps with a square-bill, spinnerbait and jig and sacked enough bass to become the B.A.S.S. Nation champion.

“My goal for the Elites is to have fun, enjoy the adventure and learn from the pros,” Wong said. “I would love to be Rookie of the Year.”

After graduating from high school, Webster joined three bass clubs and competed in their events. He later stepped up to the TBF circuit. In 2016, he won the TBF National Championship, which took his competitive fishing to another level. The prize included paid expenses to fish the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit for one year. Webster has been a standout on that tour ever since.

Webster lives in Hamilton, Ala., with his wife, Deah. They have been blessed with two girls, Mariah, 24, and Olivia, 17. Besides fishing, Webster owns and operates his own spray foam insulation business, Webster Insulation.



Your 2022 Rookie Class

Cody Huff

Missouri's Cody Huff took a quantum leap in his professional bass fishing career when he clinched the 2021 Bassmaster Opens Central Division points title. The top three year-end point leaders in all three Opens divisions receive an invitation to compete as Bassmaster Elite Series anglers the following year.

By qualifying for the 2022 Elite Series, Huff is right on schedule for his dream of making a living casting for bass. The 24-year-old got a fast start by winning the 2019 Bassmaster College Classic Bracket at Watts Bar as a member of Bethel University's fishing team. This achievement earned him a berth in the 2020 Bassmaster Classic, paid entry fees to the 2020 Bassmaster Opens and the use of a Toyota truck and a Nitro boat for one year.

His 2020 season was a roller coaster. His best and worst finishes came in the Central Division, with fifth place at the Arkansas River and 158th place at Sam Rayburn. There was no letdown in the Central Division for 2021. He finished 25th at Pickwick Lake, fifth at Smith Lake and eighth at Grand Lake to become the points champion.

One of the first people Huff talked to after the Grand Lake tournament was legendary Bassmaster pro Rick Clunn. Both anglers live in Ava, Mo., and they have known each other



Photo: Seigo Saito

since Huff was a freshman in high school.

"He was all excited that I'd made the Elites," Huff said. "We talk once a week. He has really helped me kind of develop the right mindset."

Huff has been fishing as long as he can remember. While growing up in Ava, his father, Shannon; grandfather Leon Cardell; and great grandfather Junior Huff often took him to Bull Shoals and Table Rock. His father competed in local weeknight and weekend tournaments. At around age 6, Huff began teaming up with his dad for these derbies as soon as he could cast a spinning outfit by himself.

Given Huff's success in college and with the Bassmaster Opens, it's likely he will be able to roll with whatever challenges the Elite Series throws at him.

Daisuke Aoki

Add Daisuke Aoki's name to the long list of Japanese bass pros who have found success fishing Bassmaster tournaments in the United States. He has competed in 20 Bassmaster Opens tournaments since 2019 and has been in the money in 11 of those events.

By winning the Bassmaster Southern Open at Douglas Lake, Tennessee, in mid-April 2021, he achieved his lifelong dream of qualifying for the Bassmaster Classic. The accomplishment brought tears to his eyes when he accepted the winner's trophy on stage.

Winning is nothing new for Aoki. He was ranked as the No. 1 professional bass angler in Japan in 2017. He has won Angler of the Year titles three times in his home country, which he regards as his greatest accomplishment there.

Although the waters Aoki has fished in the U.S. are larger than those in Japan, he has proved his ability to break down large lakes and find the bass. Since the baitfish here are different than those in Japan, he has had to adjust his lure choices to match the forage.

The 39-year-old angler lives in Minamitsuru-gun, Yamanashi, Japan, with his wife, Kyoko, and their two boys, Yuudai, 10, and Koudai, 8.

Besides fishing professionally in Japan and in the U.S., Aoki is the founder, CEO and managing director of DSTYLE, a premier Japanese finesse fishing tackle company. As with Japanese baits in general, DSTYLE baits feature exquisite detail.

Aoki's parents did not fish, but he was fortunate to befriend someone who introduced him to bass fishing when

he was 12. It was love at first bite. Four years later, Aoki fished his first bass tournament at Lake Ashino. He doesn't remember where he finished in that event, but it stoked his burning desire to fish professionally.

Aoki is excited about fishing the 2022 Bassmaster Classic at Lake Hartwell, but his cup is only half full.

"Now it's time to find success on the Elite Series," he said.



Photo: Shane Durrance

Jay Przekurat

After winning two Bassmaster Opens over two seasons in the co-angler division, 22-year-old Jay Przekurat jumped to the boater side in 2021. He then landed a Bassmaster Elite Series invite after finishing second in the Bassmaster Central Opens Angler of the Year standings.

After notching a 17th-place finish at the first 2021 Bassmaster Central Open at Pickwick Lake last April, the Stevens Point, Wis., native recorded his first ever Top 10 cut



Photo: Shane Durrance

at the second Central Open at Lewis Smith Lake in Alabama. He finished seventh with a 24-pound, 15-ounce three-day total. Then, a 21st-place finish at Grand Lake secured his high AOY ranking and Elite invitation.

“It’s awesome, my first Top 10 as a pro and my first year fishing as a pro. This is great,” he said. “The most rewarding thing is when you take a Top 40 and you look at the leaderboard and you beat these guys who have been doing it for years and years. Just that feeling that you can compete at this level and possibly get up to the next level, that’s everything.”

During his first two years in the Opens as a co-angler, Przekurat did not have a finish worse than 62nd and cashed five checks in eight tournaments, with wins at the 2019 Open on Grand and the 2020 Open on Lay Lake. The two victories provided the funding the young angler needed to make the jump to the professional division.

As a Wisconsin native, Przekurat has seen a variety of different fisheries and learned how to be a versatile angler, which has helped him decipher the fisheries featured on the Opens schedule.

“The thing about Wisconsin is, we have everything,” he said. “We have a lot of guys from Wisconsin that do very well, and it’s because of how versatile our state is and our fisheries. The learning curve for the Southern fisheries is, when you see baitfish and fish in general, slow down and dissect the area. Obviously, there are fish there for a reason.”

Jonathan Kelley

You’re doing something right when you qualify for the Bassmaster Elite Series at age 25 in your first season of fishing the Bassmaster Opens as a boater. Pennsylvania’s Jonathan Kelley pulled this off in a big way by claiming the 2021 Northern Opens Angler of the Year title. Along the way, he made the Top 10 in two of the three events.

Two factors encouraged Kelley to enter the Northern Opens. One, he was familiar with the tournament waters. Two, “I knew I was ready to take that jump.”

He earned his confidence the previous year by finishing 11th in the Angler of the Year standings of the Toyota Series. Had he finished one place higher, he would have qualified for the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit.

It was tempting to return to the Toyota Series, but he felt he had learned enough over a lifetime of bass fishing to take a shot at becoming a Bassmaster Elite Series angler.

Although Kelley is young, he has over two decades of bass fishing experiences from which to draw. His first outing happened at age 3. It was a bank-fishing venture to the Susquehanna River with his father, John. They turned over rocks in the shallows to find hellgrammites, which they used to catch smallmouth bass.

After graduating from high school, Kelley enrolled at South Carolina’s Coastal Carolina University, where he earned a master’s degree in business administration. The university had a fishing club, but it did not participate in tournaments. Kelley and his friend John Duarte became the university’s first fishing team.

After graduating from Coastal Carolina, Kelley returned

home to work in his father’s construction business, which specializes in plaster, stucco and stonework, plus winter snow removal.

Kelley accomplished last season’s goal of qualifying for the Bassmaster Elite Series. Now he has his sights fixed on becoming the Elite Series Rookie of the Year and qualifying for the Bassmaster Classic.



Photo: Andy Crawford

Your 2022 Rookie Class

Jacob Foutz

After the three Bassmaster Southern Open tournaments of 2021, Tennessee's Jacob Foutz took second place in the Southern Opens Angler of the Year standings. This high finish earned the young pro an invitation to the Bassmaster Elite Series. Given that Foutz is only 22 years old, he appears to be ahead of schedule. However, Foutz believes he is running behind.

This impatient mindset is mainly due to Foutz competing in the 2018 Bassmaster Classic at age 19. He qualified for bass fishing's greatest show by winning the 2017 Carhartt College Classic Bracket.

The Classic gave Foutz a mind-blowing dose of big-time tournament angling. He fished the 2018 Eastern and Central Opens in quest of his holy grail, an Elite Series berth. After the eight Open events were over, he was well short of his goal. He was hurt and frustrated.

He returned to Bryan College on the shores of Chickamauga Lake to continue pursuing a marketing degree. But his failure to qualify for the Elite Series continued to eat at him. If he stayed in college, he would have to wait two years before taking another shot at the Elites via the Bassmaster Opens. He decided to put his education on hold and chase his fishing dreams.

"I couldn't bear to wait another two years to fish the Opens, and I didn't want to run up a big college debt," Foutz said. He had to sit out the 2019 Bassmaster Opens because he didn't have the funds to fish them. To generate an



Photo: James Overstreet

income and maximize his time on the water, he started his own guiding business on Chickamauga Lake. He leveraged his reputation as a Classic contender and used the business skills he learned in college to attract clients.

He was back in the saddle in 2020 fishing the Eastern Opens, but he again fell short of the Elites. Undaunted, he came back to compete in the Southern and Central Opens in 2021, where he achieved his dream.

While Foutz was growing up in northeast Ohio, Foutz's father, Brian, and grandfathers, Jim Foutz and Don Oehlstrom, were all instrumental in stoking his bass fishing embers. He began fishing tournaments with his father at age 6. They continue to fish together regularly and usually compete in some type of local team trail.

"My parents have supported me in every way," Foutz said. "I could never repay them. The only thing I've wanted to do my whole life is to fish the Classic and the Elite Series."

Josh Douglas

Talk about paying your dues! Minnesotan Josh Douglas has competed in 57 Bassmaster Open tournaments since 2012 in his quest to qualify for the vaunted Bassmaster Elite Series. He succeeded in 2021 by finishing third in the Bassmaster Southern Opens Angler of the Year standings.



With 48th place at Florida's Harris Chain, third at Tennessee's Douglas Lake and seventh at North Carolina's Lake Norman, Douglas demonstrated his skill as a well-rounded angler. He credits the many Bassmaster Open tournaments he has fished across the country, as well as others, for teaching him how to adjust to different bass waters.

At a young age his father and stepfather introduced him to fishing for walleye and pike, which are, by far, the most popular species in Minnesota. His uncle Jeff was the outcast who introduced him to bass fishing while he was in junior high school.

"Bass fishing was his love," Douglas said of his uncle. "He had a makeshift aluminum boat he put a platform on to make it a bass boat. Minnesota has 13,000 lakes. We fished different random lakes for smallmouth and largemouth."

Douglas didn't begin fishing tournaments until 2006 when he was in his mid-20s. He bought his first bass boat then and joined the Gopher Bassmasters. The club had "a ton of talent in it," and Douglas learned a great deal about bass tactics and how to compete from the club's members.

From the club he went on to fish the Bassmaster Weekend Series and eventually the Bassmaster Opens and the FLW Tour.

His wife, Bri, and their blue heeler, Lutsen, travel with him to all Bassmaster tournaments.

Photo: Andy Crawford

Masayuki Matsushita

Japanese angler Masayuki Matsushita realized his dream of qualifying for a Bassmaster Classic when he won the 2020 Bassmaster Central Open at Sam Rayburn Reservoir. In June 2021, he headed out to compete at Lake Ray Roberts, Texas, for bass fishing's most coveted title, Bassmaster Classic champion. He ended up finishing 42nd in the event.

In 2021, Matsushita fished all three divisions of the Bassmaster Opens to fulfill his second dream, which was to



Photo: Seigo Saito

become an Elite Series pro. After the dust settled, Matsushita was second in the overall Falcon Rods Bassmaster Opens Angler of the Year standings and punched a ticket for the 2022 Bassmaster Elite Series.

That Matsushita and other Japanese anglers do well in American bass tournaments is a tribute to their competitive nature and love for the sport. Many speak little English, which makes their day-to-day lives in the U.S. challenging. They also must leave their homeland and families for months at time.

Matsushita's home is in the city of Tokoname-Shi where he lives with his wife, Chika, and two children, Aina, 10, and Emi, 8. When he is in Japan, the 38-year-old guides for bass on Lake Biwa. He typically runs about 150 trips a year and is booked six months in advance.

"I wanted to be a [professional] tournament angler since I was 19 years old," Matsushita said. "The only place to do it was in the United States."

Matsushita ventured to America for the first time in 2008 to fish six tournaments as a co-angler to "get my feet wet." These events took him to Okeechobee, Wheeler, Clarks Hill, Champlain, Falcon and Three Rivers in Pittsburgh. The variety of bass fisheries taught him a great deal.

He returned to America in 2016 to compete as a pro angler in the Bassmaster Central Opens and has been fishing the Opens every year since. He decided to compete in every Opens division in 2021, and his effort paid big dividends, making his dreams of becoming a professional angler in the U.S. a reality.

Alex Redwine

Alex Redwine of Blue Ash, Ohio, didn't feel overly stressed during the first two Bassmaster Northern Opens of 2021. That changed when he found himself holding fourth place in the Northern Opens Angler of the Year standings with one event to go. After a Top 12 finish at the final event on the St. Lawrence River at 1000 Islands, he moved up one spot in the rankings and earned the opportunity to join the Bassmaster Elite Series for 2022.

From his own perspective, the 21-year-old is ahead of schedule after making his dream of becoming an Elite angler and a bona fide bass pro came true. He began fishing with his father, Steve, at such a young age he can't remember his earliest outings.

It all began at an 11-acre lake behind his house where he started fishing with his father. When he was old enough, he would cast into the lake every day after school. He fished from the bank and from a small johnboat powered by an electric motor.

"I got addicted to it," Redwine said.

Besides high school tournaments, Redwine fished local and regional money derbies. After graduating, he enrolled at the University of Cincinnati with the hope of starting a collegiate bass fishing team there. That finally happened late in Redwine's sophomore year.

After fishing one collegiate tournament, Redwine dropped out of college so he could concentrate on qualifying for the Elite Series via the Bassmaster Opens. When not

fishing, he works as a detailer at a Cadillac dealership.

Due to his experiences fishing Ohio's stingy bass waters, Redwine is most comfortable fishing in shallow water. The Ohio River taught him how to cope with a current. This helped him nab 30th place at the 2021 Bassmaster Open on the James River. It was his first experience fishing tidal water.



Photo: Ken Gollub