

Go Fish

No longer a contemplative activity, bass fishing has become a made-for-TV sport.



The Heads of State

BASS MADNESS

Bigmouths, Big Money, and Big Dreams at the Bassmaster Classic.
By Ken Schultz.
Illustrated. 310 pp.
John Wiley & Sons. \$24.95.

By FIELD MALONEY

IN 1967, a 33-year-old Alabaman life insurance salesman named Ray Scott had an epiphany on the road, after he got rained out from a day of fishing. Scott was a reasonably successful insurance guy, and he'd managed to combine sales trips with angling, but what he really wanted was to make his living wetting a line. Sitting on his bed in a Ramada Inn, watching golf on TV, he had a flash of insight: why not start a P.G.A. of bass fishing! Not another shady, homespun bass-fishing derby: Scott would eliminate the cheating that had given such events a bad name. This would be an exclusive, invitation-only tournament with a steep entry fee and hefty prize money, featuring the 100 best anglers in the country.

Scott's brainchild is now called the Citgo Bassmaster Classic series. In 2001, ESPN bought the Bassmaster franchise for about \$40 million, convinced it could become the next Nascar. The cable company has been steadily sexing up its pro fishing coverage with "Miami Vice"-style cutting shots, a rock soundtrack and a younger generation of angling stars who scream, pump their fists and even break dance on their bass boats when they hook a big one.

Ken Schultz's "Bass Madness" is about these changes, and the civil war they've provoked within the ranks of pro bass fishing. It pits ESPN and those amenable to the sport's becoming a made-for-TV pageant like pro wrestling (but without the phony results), against those who worry that its integrity will be trashed in the process, taking down fishing's venerable ethics of conservation and sportsmanship — what they see as its soul — with it.

There's no question which corner Schultz is in. His angling bona fides go deep: he has written more than a dozen books on the subject, and he was a fishing editor and a staff writer for *Field & Stream* magazine for over three decades. And he attended seven Bassmaster Classics in the good old days — the 70's and early 80's, when journalists got to

Field Maloney is on the editorial staff of *The New Yorker*.

ride in a boat with a pro, and were free to cast a line while reporting, as long as they didn't get in the way. But when the book begins, he hasn't been to a Classic since 1982. His New York-based editors at *Field & Stream* considered fishing a properly contemplative, not a competitive, activity and weren't interested in covering tournaments. And Schultz, for his part, says that "watching other people catch fish on television does nothing for me," and that he's "puzzled by the bass fishing fan thing." Nonetheless, in "Bass Madness," he gamely sets out to see what the fuss is about, and to cast a skeptical, learned eye on how ESPN's gamble is actually faring.

Schultz chronicles the Bassmaster Classic, a three-day tournament billed as the "Super Bowl" of competitive bass fishing, whose winner pockets a half-million dollars. The book opens with an account of the 2005 Classic, held in that anglers' paradise, Pittsburgh. It ends with the 2006 classic held on the Upper Kissimmee Chain of Lakes in Florida. These real-time, present-tense narratives bookend a more digressive tale of the rise of Ray Scott's Bassmaster foundation and of largemouth bass angling in America.

For most of the book, Schultz's bad guy is a histrionic 33-year-old bass pro from New Jersey named Mike Iaconelli, who not only yells at the camera but yells at his fish, and who generally seems to model his behavior on pro wrestlers like Junkyard Dog. (Schultz apparently isn't alone in his disapproval: *Esquire* has called Iaconelli one of the 10 most hated pro athletes.) Schultz also gives us some nice snapshots of tour pros like Rick Clunn, disparaged by some bassheads as a "damn Buddhist" for, among other things, "staying at campgrounds while at tournaments so he can be more attuned with nature." Or Takahiro Omori, winner of the 2004 Bassmaster Classic, who came to America from Japan in 1992. (There seems to be a Japanese craze for American bass fishing.) Omori arrives here virtually penniless and without any English, and lives out of a 1965 Chevy Suburban for three years while trying to break into the pro angling circuit. When he finally has some pro success, he buys a house in Lake Fork, Tex., where he installs a swimming pool, not for swimming but for testing lures.

"Bass Madness" is an entertaining picaresque. At times Schultz can be a little blunt and didactic — you wish he didn't club his target so much as hook it. The most interesting, and damning, thing he says comes offhand: the number of Americans who actually fish has declined as Bassmaster's television audience has grown. □

ESPN has been steadily sexing up its pro fishing coverage with 'Miami Vice'-style cutting shots and a rock soundtrack.