

Hook, Set, Flush

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Riverwind Fish and Chips

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Riverwind Casino can pack the house on a concert night, but October 22, a different kind of crowd was lured to the Showplace Theatre. People of all ages crowded around tables to meet Skeet Reese, Kevin Van Dam and the 98 other professional anglers competing in Riverwind Casino's \$100,000 Fish and Chips Tournament.

While most of the anglers were gearing up for a routine bass fishing tournament with the twist of a poker tournament at the end, Oklahoma State University Bass Fishing Team member Bryce Bechtel and his partner Cody Fuller were preparing to compete against the professional fishermen they admire most.

Bechtel, a junior majoring in agricultural economics, said he was most looking forward to fishing against the pros, including numerous Bassmaster Classic champions and anglers from the Bassmaster Elite Series.

Bechtel and Fuller could have been in deep water, but they soon realized the anglers were like a family: they all started from the same place and they were willing to help one another.

Bechtel started fishing with his dad when he was two or three, and said he has treasured every minute he has spent on the water with his dad since then.

“The challenge of it is what really got me going, and kept me hooked,” Bechtel said. “After Dad took me the first time I never wanted to stop.”

The story is similar to those of many professional anglers competing in the tournament.

Reese, the 2009 Bassmaster Classic Champion, said he remembers catching his first bass when he was eight, and decided he wanted to be a professional fisherman when he was 12 years old. At 14 years old he joined a bass club and began fishing in tournaments, and bought his first bass boat when he turned 18.

“It was a little weird, and I guess it shows you where my priorities are, that I bought a bass boat before I had a vehicle,” Reese said. “It was kind of strange, I had to call my buddies and ask 'Hey, would you haul my boat to the lake this weekend?’”

Van Dam, a two-time Bassmaster Classic Champion, grew up fishing in Michigan at his grandparents house on the lake. When he was 18 years old, he fished in his first Bass Anglers Sportsmans' Society tournament. He went to college for two years, then quit to work at his brother's sporting goods store. Soon after that, he began fishing full-time.

Bassmaster Elite Series host Mark Zona said he began fishing in tournaments when he was nine years old, but he never thought he would be involved with the television show. He originally thought the phone call inviting him to be a part of the show was a joke being played by his friends.

“My favorite show growing up was that show – the Bassmaster,” Zona said. “To be a part of that, I am the luckiest person in the world.”

Bechtel said he was looking forward to the tournament not just for the competition, but also for the chance connect with and learn from the anglers.

“It was great to say I have competed against them,” Bechtel said. “It was even better to have met them because now anytime I need their help, they're just a phone call away. The

connections I made at this tournament are unbelievable.”

Bechtel was most excited to meet Van Dam, and he said enjoyed getting know all the anglers in the tournament.

“[Van Dam] is not hard to admire,” Bechtel said. “There are several others that are great guys that have been very willing to not only help me, but anyone who talks to them.”

Van Dam said that cooperative attitude of the men he fishes with really helped him when he was starting his fishing career.

“Those guys were extremely nice and very helpful to me early on,” Van Dam said. “We help each other out and hang out together. We spend so much time on the road at tournaments with these guys that they are like second families.”

While they may have a brotherly love for one another, there is no shortage of competition among the men at a fishing tournament.

“[I enjoy] the competitiveness between other anglers and the challenge it is mentally to keep fishing hard even on the tough days,” Bechtel said.

Van Dam said he also enjoys the challenges presented by the sport.

“It's a challenge,” Van Dam said. “Compared to other sports, there is so much guess work. It is very much a mental sport. We don't know where they're at. We can't see them. We are just guessing based on the water conditions and lake conditions and things.”

Reese said bass tournament fishing takes more skill and physical and mental strength than some might realize.

“We've had lots of athletes in different sports come out and spend a day or week on the

water with us tournament fishing,” Reese said. “It is a different physical standpoint than being a running back or being in the NBA. We have eight to nine hours of competition. That alone is a challenge. Then there is the physical aspect of it. We may make three to four thousand casts a day, which could burn three to four thousand calories.”

Van Dam agrees with Reese, saying there is more to the sport than luck.

“I think non-fishermen especially think there is a lot of luck involved,” Van Dam said. “I don't believe in luck at all. Getting them to bite in the first place is not luck. There's a lot to it and it's a science that's far from exact.”

Reese said any young fisherman wanting to one day be in his shoes just needs to practice. Bechtel also subscribes to this belief and said he fishes as much as he can.

“No matter what the weather, if I have a chance, I will be on the water,” Bechtel said. “I go to every tournament possible. I feel like the more you are on the water the more you are going to learn.”

Bechtel has stayed involved in fishing as a member of the OSU fishing team the last three years.

“I read about [the OSU fishing team] in the newspaper my senior year of high school and knew I wanted to join as soon as I got here my freshman year,” Bechtel said.

Bechtel enjoys being a part of the team and having the opportunity to represent OSU.

“My favorite thing about OSU fishing is that we have a good group of guys and when we go to a tournament we represent the university well,” Bechtel said. “After having a good year last year, we are well recognized when we show up to collegiate tournaments.”

The men involved with the Bassmaster Elite Series are doing what they love and they consider that to be a true measure of success.

“I feel blessed that I have been able to make a living at something I truly love to do,” Van Dam said. “Every day I get to go out and make a living at something I'm passionate about.”

Zona said working with his best friends who happen to be the best at what they do make him love going to work every day.

“To cover the Bassmaster Elite Series and these guys in this room, it is an honor,” Zona said.

At the end of the weekend, Dean Rojas and amateur partner Jayson Kisselburg came in first with a two-day weight of 21.74 pounds in seven fish. Van Dam and partner Lance Peck weighed eight fish in at 19.46 pounds, coming in second.

Corey Smith won the poker side of the tournament, followed by Clark Reehm in second and Matt Pangrac in third.

Rojas and Kisselburg held their own in the poker tournament, placing 45th and 32nd, respectively. Their standings were good enough that they won the overall tournament, a \$50,000 prize.

While the chips didn't fall where Bechtel would have liked, he was glad he had the opportunity to fish in the tournament.

“The tournament was a great time, and I had a lot of fun playing poker against all those guys,” Bechtel said.