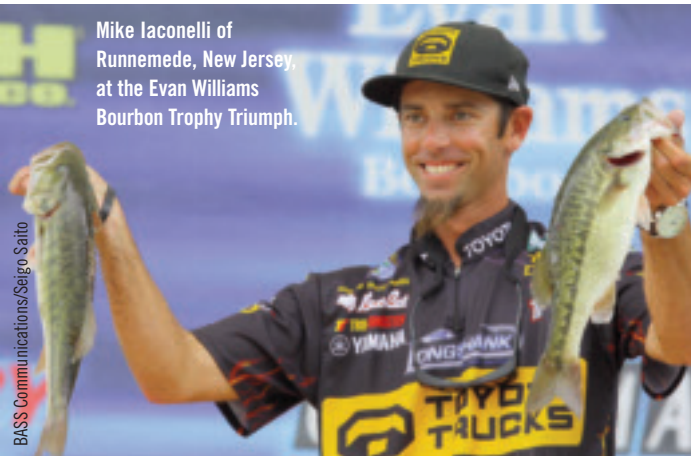


Taking the bait (and prize money too)

Italian American bass fisherman Mike Iaconelli is at the top of his game.

By Patricia Beemer



Mike Iaconelli of Runnemede, New Jersey, at the Evan Williams Bourbon Trophy Triumph.

If you think of fishing as a sleepy, passive day of dropping a line and hoping for luck, you've clearly never seen Mike Iaconelli.

A fixture on the professional bass fishing circuit for more than a decade, Iaconelli prepares for a tournament with a level of research and strategy that would make a general proud. Once on the water, he roars off at breakneck speed in his customized BassCat to his chosen fishing spot. When he catches a good one, he screams and carries on in a way that, well, you have to see to believe. He's even been known to perform an impromptu breakdance of celebration on the bow. Now and then, he's also been known to have a histrionic meltdown when things go wrong.

While there will always be some competitors and fans who don't appreciate his style, in the angling world, Iaconelli, 37, is a rock star. His screaming fans turn out by the thousands to root for him at tournaments. At the end of a week-long competition they go wild when he enters the arena for the final weigh-in, cheering for him as if he were Caesar triumphant. Standing on his boat as it's towed in, he waves to the crowd, and his fans go nuts. They throng at the dockside to get his autograph, and he's still signing long after the last of the other anglers has left.

Say what you will about his style, there's no arguing with his skills: This guy can fish, and his career winnings show it. This year he finished in the top five in five major tournaments. In 10 years he has won \$1,644,834. Consider the fact that a pro angler's winnings are a mere fraction of the earnings brought in by sponsorships, endorsements, and independent projects—such as his TV show, "City Limits Fishing," which airs Friday evenings on

Versus—and it's clear that Iaconelli has found the formula to make a stellar career out of most anglers' weekend hobby.

Nobody who knew Iaconelli when he was growing up could be surprised at his passion for fishing. "My mom and my family have pictures of me when I was practically an infant holding a rod," he recalls. "They got me started really early."

"Until I was six years old, I lived in South Philly, pretty much the heart of Italian country in Philadelphia," he recalls. "My mom is pure Pennsylvania Dutch, and my dad is Italian, so growing up I had this kind of weird mix of the Italian life and the Dutch life together, which was neat. The one commonality between both sides of my family was the love of fishing."

When Iaconelli was six, the family moved to Runnemede, New Jersey, just across the river from Philadelphia. "Summer was our big time that we'd look forward to go fishing. We would saltwater fish down the Jersey shore, and then we would do the Pocono Mountains. We would do those trips every year. Family vacations were about fishing. It was definitely a neat way to grow up."

Beyond his unfailing love of the sport, Iaconelli attributes his success to the time he puts into preparation before a tournament. "Different professionals approach it differently," he explains, "but my style has always been that I do a lot of legwork before I actually get to the event. You can get a lot of information on a place before you even get there." First, he conducts extensive research on the site of an upcoming tournament, both on the Internet and in his own personal bass research library, which he's been compiling since childhood. "I have, literally, every bass magazine you can imagine from 1983 to now. I keep everything catalogued, so I'm able to go back and get information on a place."

A major element of this research involves maps of the tournament site. He uses both paper maps and navionics chips, which work like a memory card to overlay a depiction of a lake's depth contours over a GPS display. "So now you're able to go out to a lake, let's say Clear Lake out in California, and it shows your physical location on Clear Lake, and it shows the depth contours where you're at, and it's accurate within half a foot. It's unbelievable how that mapping technology has now gone from a two-dimensional paper to the screen where you're actually fishing."

Iaconelli then takes the information he's gleaned ➤

from research and mapping and combines it, along with seasonal and weather information, with his knowledge of bass behavior. “Bass do certain things at certain times of the year, based on water temperature and season and stuff like that. I’m able to compile that information and make a lot of educated guesses before I ever get to a place. That helps, because we’re fishing places that are 50,000 acres, 100,000 acres—I mean, we’re fishing giant places. I’m able to break it down into smaller pieces before I get there.”

The second part of his preparation for a tournament is practicing on location. “In most of these events we’ve got two or three days of practice. Then I’m able to take that information, I’m able to get on the water, and then actually fine-tune what those guesses were. Between those two things, that’s what I use to put together my game plan for that event.”

Iaconelli is not a big believer in the importance of intuition in fishing. “I feel like of the 100-plus guys that are out there doing it full time professionally, there are a handful that have a very natural ability to find fish and go to a place and never think about it, just get out there and find them. For me, I might have a little bit of that, but my success has always been more around the work part of it, just doing the research, spending those two practice days getting up at the crack of dawn and fishing ‘til the sun goes down. That kind of work ethic has always helped me get to the next level.”

Iaconelli vividly recalls the day that fishing went from being a pastime to a passion for him. “I remember the first bass that I caught, and that’s the one that got me hooked on doing this like I do it. I was 11 or 12 years old, and...it was the first bass that I’d caught on an artificial lure. It was a topwater lure—a lure that floats on the surface—and the fish just exploded on the bait!” he says, the excitement still in his voice decades later. “And it was so visual, and the thrill of seeing that fish come up on that plug—it was unbelievable. Pretty much from that point on, I was really addicted to bass fishing.”

After high school he joined a fishing club and

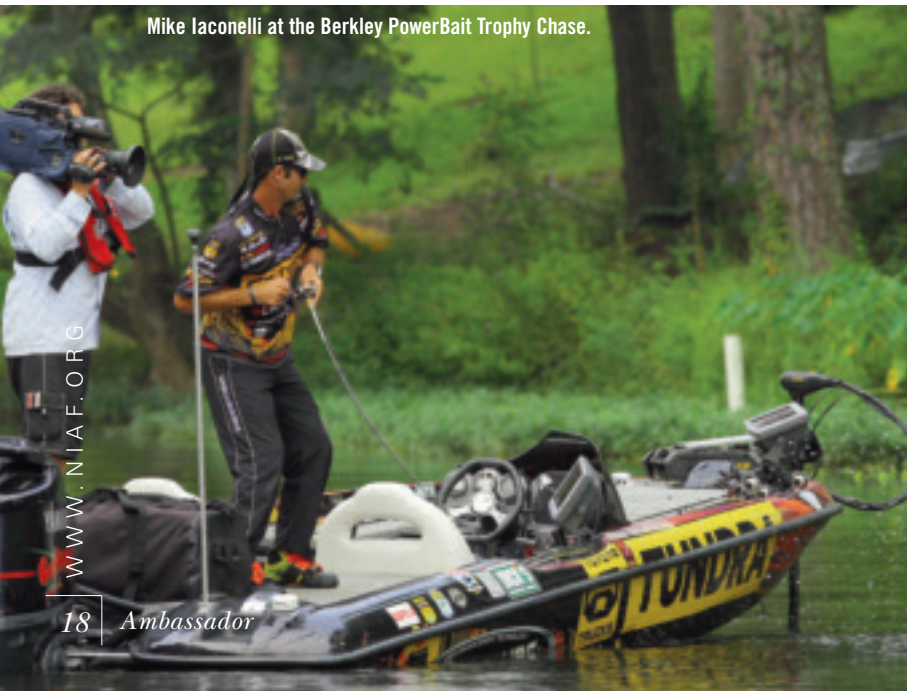
began to fish competitively. A couple of years later, he started to think that he might be able to make a living at it. “When I was a sophomore in college I started fishing these professional-level tournaments as an amateur. The first one I didn’t do very well in. I had a great time; I learned a lot. I decided to enter a second one, and the second one I entered, I actually won. It was unbelievable—I was a college kid, 21, 22 years old—and I think first place was, like \$23,000. After that win was the first time I said, ‘Wow, this is something I think I can do, and something I want to pursue.’”

Iaconelli made a five-year plan, which included finishing his degree in advertising and public relations (summa cum laude from Rowan University in New Jersey). “I said in my mind, ‘Give it five years. If we can make it happen, great. If not, I’ve got this degree, and I’ll still enjoy fishing.’”

He competed as an amateur when he could, starting out in a 12-foot, plastic Coleman boat. He supported himself by working as a DJ at clubs, weddings and parties. The work was fun and lucrative, but it didn’t mesh well with predawn tournament starts. So he took a job managing the fishing department at Dick’s Sporting Goods (now one of his sponsors), where the management would hold his job while he was gone fishing. Iaconelli remembers to this day how accommodating his employer was. “Even after I qualified to turn pro, which was 1999, I still held the job. The second pro tournament I ever fished as a professional, I ended up winning that, and first place was, I think, \$110,000. It wasn’t until I won that tournament that I had enough financial support to be able to quit my job.”

Iaconelli’s preparation for a tournament may be serious and methodical, but during the tournament his behavior can seem downright wild and over-the-top. Skeptics may say it’s all for show, but Iaconelli insists that he’s always been that way. “I guess it’s a lot of the way I grew up and the area I grew up in, and my family and all that stuff. But I’ve always been real emotional and passionate about whatever I was doing. Most of the time the screaming is joy ➤

Mike Iaconelli at the Berkley PowerBait Trophy Chase.



A fan shows her support for Michael Iaconelli before the launch on day three of the 2009 Bassmaster Classic.





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screams. Every once in a while it's anger screams," he concedes, with a touch of sheepishness in his voice, "but the joy ones are a lot better."

Iaconelli's theatrics were a shock to the system when he joined the tour in 1999. At the time, the world of professional bass fishing was dominated by Southern country boys, and the brash New Jerseyan with a taste for rap music and tattoos ruffled a lot of feathers. "I can tell you that in my semipro days, and even in my first year or two of professional fishing I felt a pressure to conform. At that time, I guess my mentality was different, but I just got to the point where I figured, 'You know what? I'm going to be myself.' And I just started being who I am, and it was captured on TV in one tournament. And the neat thing about it is—some people didn't like it, obviously, but the overriding reaction for people is, 'This is awesome!' And all of a sudden, people that maybe didn't necessarily like fishing were like, 'Fishing's like this? I didn't know fishing was this exciting and fun.' And they were really able to grab a hold of it...It's an important part of growing the sport, you know?"

"Growing the sport," as he likes to put it, is a mission for Iaconelli. "We're still not where we should be," he explains, "but we're one of those sports that's rising. I compare it to NASCAR in its infancy. It started out as a southern-dominated sport, then it kind of caught the eye of mainstream America and took a couple of years for it to get really big. That's kind of where we're at right now with professional bass fishing." He attributes part of that growth to the expansion of media, including the Internet and specialized cable networks such as ESPN and Versus.

To demonstrate that the sport can be rewarding almost anywhere, he created "City Limits Fishing." Now in its third season on Versus Country, the cable channel's Friday-night lineup, the show sends Iaconelli fishing in a different urban waterway each week. Teamed up with a local angler, he demonstrates the acumen that has made him a champion. More importantly, he offers a lot of useful advice and encouragement to amateurs—even those who live far from better-known fishing spots. "Every big city we go into, people are looking at you like you're an alien—looking at you like you have three heads when you tell 'em there's fish here, and then you actually go and catch 'em, and it's amazing. I think it's opening people's eyes to the resources that are everywhere."

The show has grown steadily in popularity. "It's been great because it's captured people that normally wouldn't sit down for 30 minutes and watch a fishing show. That's great for me, and it's great for the sport right now, because we need new people tuning in on that stuff."

Iaconelli offers advice for the average weekend angler. "The stereotypical tendency when you think about fishing is to think that it's lucky. I'll be honest with you: I think there's as much luck in fishing as in anything in life, so, is there some luck? Well yeah, maybe a little. But the bigger picture is, again, it's a puzzle, and there's a reason why things are

happening. And that to me is the challenge of the sport, being able to figure out that puzzle."

Of course, no system is perfect. "I still have bad days, like everybody. Things aren't going right, you have a bad tournament, equipment malfunctions, or you've been on the road for three weeks and you're tired—those things still happen. But I can honestly tell you that I love it as much as I did when I was 12 years old and I caught that first bass."

In addition to competing in two pro tournament circuits, BASS (Bass Anglers Sportsman Society) and FLW (Forrest L. Woods), Iaconelli participates in a number of sponsor events and made-for-TV events. He also supports a number of charitable causes, including the USO, the V Foundation for Cancer Research, Autism Awareness and the Myositis Association. Combined with the time he spends shooting "City Limits Fishing," these commitments have him fishing professionally about 180 days a year. When he gets home to Pittsgrove, New Jersey, where he lives with his wife, Rebecca, he still fishes for fun nearly every other



Mike Iaconelli at the Capitol Clash 2006 Elite Series.

day. "I live on a lake, so I'll go in the backyard and fish, and fish local tournaments, and go on trips with my buddies from high school—we'll go trout fishing—I love it. I can't get enough of it."

The love of fishing is being passed down to a new generation of Iaconellis. Mike's two daughters from a previous marriage, Drew (11) and Riley (9), have taken up the rod and reel. "They absolutely love it. There's nothing else they'd rather do with Dad. When they start to get into their teens, we'll see what happens," he says with a laugh. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed!"

Iaconelli may be a non-traditional guy, but the love for fishing is one family tradition that he wants to be sure to pass on. ▲