



October 7, 2011

On the long drive to New York, all I could think of was Lake Oneida and the many ways I patterned bass there in the past. Oneida's an awesome lake and it's always been good to me. But this time a top-12 finish wouldn't be good enough. I needed to win, as that was my only hope of qualifying for the upcoming BASS Masters Classic.

Stretching east to west, Oneida Lake is approximately 22 miles in length and 5 miles across at its widest point. Many pros consider Oneida too small for major tournaments. But because its fish are so plentiful and well dispersed, the field usually spreads out. At least that's been my experience in the Elite events, where the field is limited to 100 boats. The Opens allow as many as 150 boats, so I wasn't quite sure what to expect.

One thing is certain, for its size, Oneida has a healthy population of bass—both largemouth and smallmouth. In fact, I'd argue that it has more fish per acre than any lake on our schedule.

Curiously, there seems to be two types of smallmouth on Oneida; those that live offshore chasing bait or relating to structure, and an inshore population that act more like largemouth in the way they relate to weedbeds. I've caught some of my best stringers of smallmouth by pitching jigs into shoreline grass. You don't see that very often!

One Last Shot ☐ ☐

Arriving in New York on Sunday prior to competition, I caught up with my roommate, Terry Segraves. Terry was fresh off an FLW event on Lake Champlain and had fully acclimated to the cold, rainy weather. Me? I had to dig for some britches...my Florida attire wasn't suited to the conditions.

That night over dinner, we discussed the weather ahead and strategies for the tournament.

Beatin' The Bank with Bernie Schultz - Lake Oneida BASS Northern Open

Written by Bernie Schultz

Friday, 07 October 2011 08:20 - Last Updated Monday, 10 October 2011 07:56

With fall arriving so abruptly, neither of us knew for sure how the weather change might impact the fish.

Joining us for dinner was my old friend, Joe Stagnitti. A resident of the Syracuse area, Joe's a fulltime broker of antique tackle. That's right! He makes his living by searching out vintage lures at auctions, antique shows, estate sales, eBay, and by networking with collectors worldwide. I've been in the hobby for years, and "The Stag" is by far the most successful and knowledgeable dealer I know. Besides that, he's fun to fish with.

Joe and I had made plans to fish together on the final day prior to the official practice period (during that time competitors are allowed to fish with whomever they choose). After an enjoyable dinner, it was back to the hotel for some much needed rest. **The Search**

Begins

The next morning we took off from Oneida Shores Park, official launch and weigh-in site for the event. I told Joe we'd hit a few spots I fished in the past, then head to the eastern end of the lake where he was more familiar.

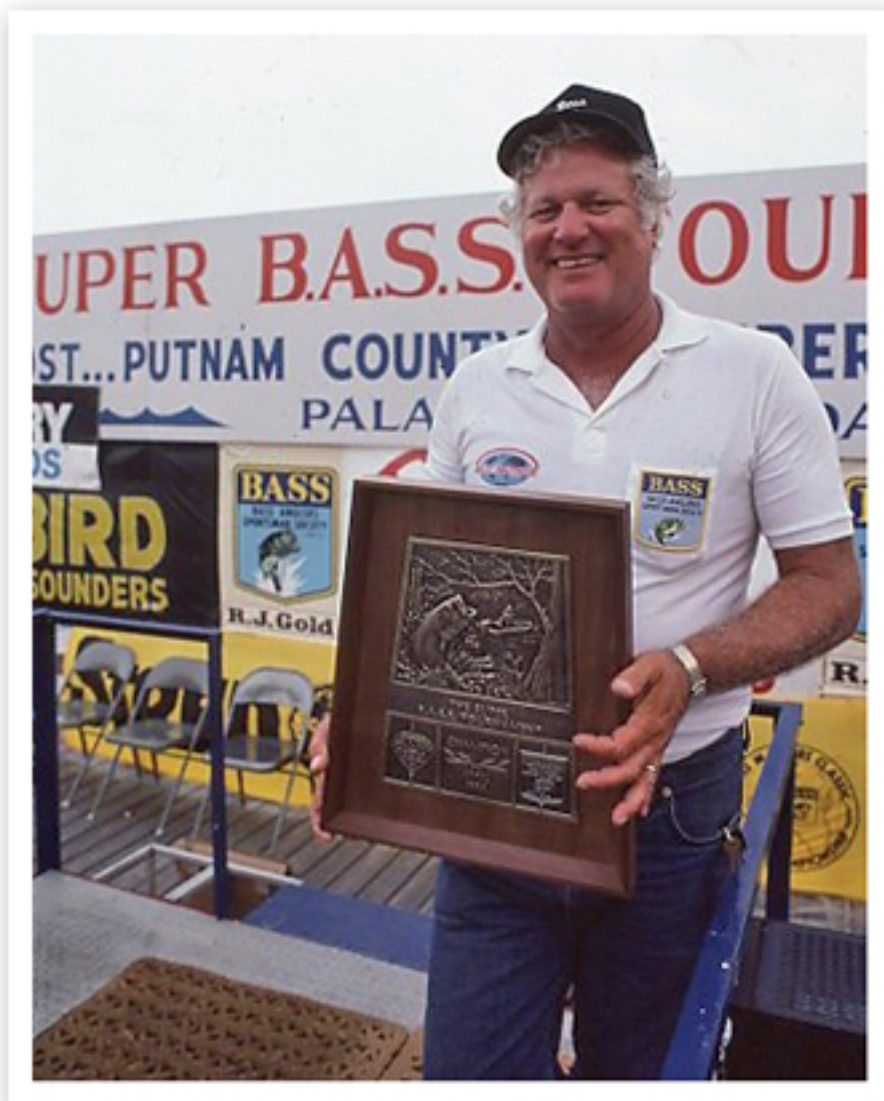
The wind blew stiff out of the northeast as we hopped from spot to spot. Unfortunately, my game plan wasn't paying off. Either the wind prevented us from fishing key spots effectively, or the fish were gone. So we moved further east to get out of the waves.

By late afternoon, Joe and I stumbled onto a good school of smallmouth. Finally some action! The fish were boiling baitfish on the surface, so I broke out the new Rapala Rippin' Rap and went to work. After catching several over three pounds, I told Joe we needed to leave.

Soon after, I found a mat of pickerelweed in about six feet of water. On our first pass we had five bites. All were largemouth between two and three pounds. Things were just starting to come together, when suddenly, I received a message from back home—my good friend Doug Gilley had just passed away. The news was devastating. Doug was one of the most influential people in my fishing career—a true pioneer among Florida's fishing fraternity.

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Florida Fishing Legend, Doug Gilley. - photo by Gerald Crawford, courtesy of BASSMASTER.com

~~Official Practice~~

The next day my phone rang early—mutual friends and contacts calling about Gilley's passing. I heard from Fish Fishburne, Steve Daniel, John Bitter, Mark Fisher and countless others. All of us were in shock over the loss.

As the day wore on, I tried to get my mind back on finding some fish, but it wasn't easy. I was merely going through the motions.

Soon the media got involved, wanting to know more about my relationship to Gilley and his fishing exploits. I was glad to oblige. Talking about it seemed to help, and if the media was going to write about him, I wanted to be sure his family saw a worthy tribute.

Over the next two days I alternated casts with texts and phone calls—some to Doug's family,

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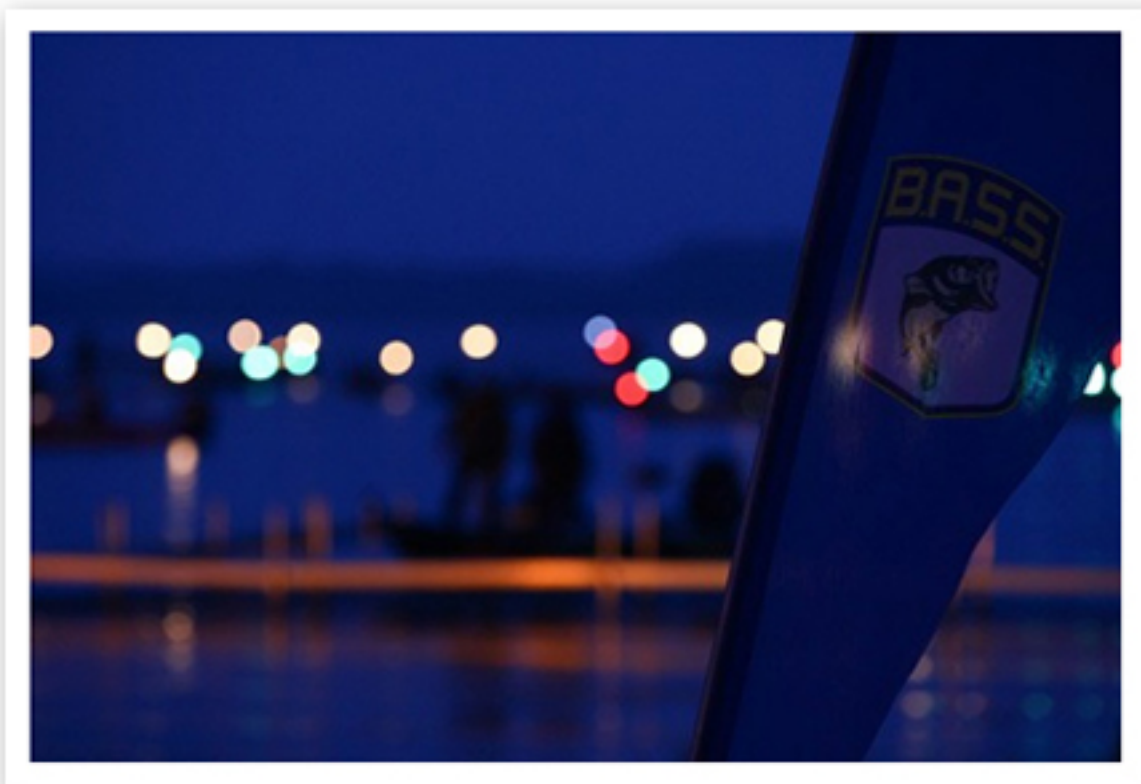
others to media and mutual friends. Not only was Gilley an accomplished angler and guide, he was also a longtime tackle and marine rep. The news of his passing sent a shockwave through the industry.

In spite of the distractions, I continued to find fish...good fish. Oneida's friendly that way, especially for the shallow-water types like myself. Toads, topwaters and lipless crankbaits accounted for much of the action. By the time official practice had concluded, I felt I had a chance to win. All I needed was an early draw to secure one of the key spots and my package of Rippin' Raps to arrive on time.

Fishing With Purpose ☐☐

With a disappointing draw, my partner and I were stuck in the 7th flight. The only good thing about it was that we'd have a long day to fish. Our flight wouldn't weigh in until 4pm.

Once through check out, we raced across the lake to Big Bay. In the back was a ton of largemouth schooling on shad. As expected, several boats beat us to the key spot.



Northern Lights on Oneida. - photo by James Overstreet, courtesy of BASSMASTER.com

I told my partner we'd start across the bay from them, then work our way toward the crowd. Starting with a small bone-colored SkitterWalk, I worked the lure through lanes of topped out grass. Almost immediately, pickerel were hounding the lure.

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I switched to a Zoom Horny Toad, racing it across topped out crowns of grass. More pickerel. After a dozen of the toothy critters, finally a 3 1/2-pound bass crushed the Toad. Not bad for my first bass.

Pressing on, I eventually stuck another three-pounder. Although the bites were few and far between, their average weight was right and I knew I could finish an easy limit in the schoolie hole.

With time on my side, I worked closer to the pack of boats at the back of the bay. The group included David Walker, Dave Lefebre, Pat Golden, and a couple others I didn't recognize. Once in range, a small school of bass erupted along the deep edge of the grassbed. Three casts with the Skitterwalk and my limit was complete.

Eventually Walker and Lefebre left. I stayed long enough to cull up to what I believed was a 14-pound limit. Satisfied, I told my partner we were headed to a smallmouth spot.

About halfway down the lake, I pulled into a small bay. On final approach I could see a boat sitting dead on my numbers. It was David Walker, again. He just grinned.

I skirted his boat closely heading to the shallower part of the flat. As I passed him, he bowed up on a quality fish. As he swung the fish aboard, I said, "Largemouth?" He told me that was all he had been catching since arriving. I told him that was strange, that all I caught there in practice were smallies. He acknowledged the same.

David had his Power-Poles planted on the prime spot, a place where he could work two separate schools of fish without moving the boat. I told my partner we were fishing leftovers. The flat consisted of patchy grass and scattered boulders. The smallies had related more to the rocks, but now that they were gone, largemouth were sitting in the holes between the grass clumps, ambushing schools of shad as they happened by.

Surprisingly, after culling a couple more fish, Walker raised his Power-Poles and said he was off to another area. I couldn't believe it. It was like a gift. As soon as he left, I positioned my boat directly over the same spot and dropped the Power-Pole. The fish continued to break periodically, but catching them had become next to impossible. Like schoolies pressured on other lakes, these had wised up. I went through a quiver of different lures, including tubes, Senkos, grubs, flukes, various topwaters, even a Scrounger. But they wouldn't touch anything.

Eventually I pulled the Power-Pole and began pitching into the scattered weed clumps. That paid off with a nice 3 1/2-pounder. As I culled, several other boats in the area moved on top of us. Fishing had become considerably tougher and guys were frantically trying to improve their catch. No matter what the rest of the day brought, I was glad with what I had.

Throughout the afternoon it rained steadily, even hard at times. To that, I attributed the poor

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smallmouth bite. By check-in time Oneida Shores Park looked like a swamp. I carried what I believed was a 16-pound bag to the scales, only to be told it weighed 14-05. I was so stunned by the news I neglected to challenge the weight in time. I knew full well my catch easily exceeded 15 pounds.

Back at the service yard, I heard others complaining about the scales. Although frustrated, I wrote it off, thinking the error must have been the same for everyone.



Ish's Frog Wins Oneida. - p
BASSMASTER.com

When it was all said and done, Ish Monroe had taken a sizeable lead by throwing his signature frog to shoreline grass. How did I miss that bite? I dedicated considerable time to that pattern in practice, and other than one small area of matted grass, I couldn't buy a strike on a frog.

Catch Up Time

With nearly a 5-pound deficit to make up, I told my next day partner I was reversing my game plan. The clouds had broken and I expected the smallmouth to return to the shallow flat where I ran into Walker. With an earlier draw, I thought I might get there first.

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Wrong!

On final approach I could see Walker's all-too-familiar boat with Power-Poles planted on the key spot. Pissed, I moved further up the shoreline. With the wind to my back, I began a slow drift through the area.

Nothing was happening, even for Walker. Conditions were exactly the same as when I found the smallies smashing schools of shad in practice, but this was obviously a different day. I worked through a variety of baits with no results. Walker quickly abandoned the area. I stayed and moved even shallower, to almost no water. Smallmouth sometimes get so shallow on a windy bank, it's hard to believe it. Big ones too!

The wind began to howl harder from the east. Two hours passed and I finally gave up on the area. I told my partner I wanted to try one other spot, and if that failed to produce, we'd head back to where I caught the largemouth the day before.

Minutes turned to hours, and still nothing. My partner managed a decent largemouth out of nowhere, but that was it. Finally, with half the day gone, we retreated to Big Bay, praying for a miracle.

Almost immediately, I caught a nice 3-pounder. With three hours to fish, I told my partner we still had enough time. Unfortunately, the wind had other plans. As the day wore on, the gusts kept coming directly into the bay. Almost no schooling took place. I settled on flipping a [Yamamoto Fat Baby Craw](#) to holes in the grass, and by days end I managed only three more keepers. I knew my hot streak on Oneida had come to an end.

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The Silver Fox always made time for others. - photo by Gerald Crawford, courtesy of BASSMASTER.com

Remembering A Friend ☐

Saturday morning at 5:15am, Steve Daniel called for a live interview on his south Florida radio program, ***Hooked Up with Steve & Deb*** (WOKC). Dedicating the show to the memory of Doug Gilley, Steve scheduled numerous pros to speak on Doug's behalf. It was an awesome gesture.

Included were my roommate Terry Segraves, Tim Horton, Shaw Grigsby, and Fish Fishburne. Scores of other callers chimed in as well, relating their experiences with Gilley.

Later, Steve told me it was his best show ever, and that the switchboard lit up with so many callers he couldn't get to them all. Gilley made a lasting impression on a lot of people, and everyone that knew him, liked him. Hopefully the effort brought some smiles to the family. It was an outstanding tribute to one of Florida's greatest angling legends.

After the interview, Terry and I packed up and headed for Florida. With the long season finally over, I was looking forward to home.

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**Note: To read more about Florida bass fishing legend, Doug Gilley, see Ken Duke's fantastic article at www.bassmaster.com. It's a good read and well worth the time.*