By Terry Battisti

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There are a number of things Ray Scott probably never dreamed of as he sat in a Jacksonville, MS motel one rainy day in 1967 after being rained out of a fishing trip. I'm sure he had visions of bass fishing becoming a recognized and respected sport – but did he really believe, at the time, that in five short years he'd have nearly the entire nation rallied around the overgrown sunfish?

With B.A.S.S. growing, his next step was to unify bass anglers by having them form clubs. These clubs became Chapter members of B.A.S.S. and were used to promote better fishing and clean water throughout the United States.

By 1973, the Chapter had grown to such an immense size that he decided to have the first Chapter Championship – pitting 6-man state teams against each other to decide what state had the best bass anglers. The other twist that came with this championship was the overall individual angler would get a birth in the third-annual Bassmaster Classic.

Since that time, 181 anglers have qualified for the Bassmaster Classic via the Federation – or what is now known as the B.A.S.S. Nation. Of those anglers, very few are multi-time qualifiers – 15 to be exact.

That brings us to an angler – one of the 15 mentioned above – who has qualified for the Classic more times than anyone else through the B.A.S.S. Nation. What makes his 5-time qualification even more impressive, though, is that he doesn't hail from Montgomery, AL, or Florida, or Tennessee or even the United States.

The person we're talking about is Zimbabwe angler Gerry Jooste.

Over the past few weeks I've had the opportunity to talk with Jooste about bass fishing and his record accomplishment. Here's what he had to say about making the Classic and what it's like

to be a bass angler in his home of Zimbabwe.

The Early Days

Most anglers are introduced to fishing by a relative and more times than not, the experience involved a small pond or local lake. Such was the case with Jooste, who started fishing the small farm ponds of his local neighborhood.

“I caught my first bass in a farm pond, and I’m guessing that I was seven or eight years old,” he said. “I think I was hooked from that very moment.

“As a kid I would spend a lot of my weekends and holidays fishing the farm ponds in my neighborhood.

By 1984 Jooste was fully entrenched in bass fishing and his next step was to join a club to try his hand at the competitive side of the sport.

“I joined a Bass Club in 1984 and had my first taste of club tournament fishing. My buddy and I never weighed a single bass that first season, but we must have learned something as we won just about everything the following season.

The Zimbabwe Federation

Zimbabwe had the first international Chapter club, the Bulawayo Bass Club, ever to join B.A.S.S. The year was 1972 – long before Jooste had visions of fishing competitively.

“(I)n 1979 the Zimbabwe Bass Federation was started by Gerry Leach, the founding Federation president, and he was responsible for affiliating six Chapters in order that Zimbabwe could qualify as a Federation.

The Road to the Classic

Jooste fished the Federation for a number of years prior to making his first team. In 1993 he made his first team, which gave him his first opportunity to come to the U.S. That event was the Federation Divisionals held at Bull Shoals, AR.

The following year he also made the team and qualified again to come to the U.S. to participate in the Nationals.

“(In 1994) I fished the Wrangler Bass National Championship on the Arkansas River,” he said. “This was a truly memorable tournament for me for many reasons. I qualified for my first Classic, but more importantly I was there when Bryan Kerchal made history and won that Classic on High Rock Lake – the most inspirational event in my fishing career.

“To be honest, I was really lucky to qualify for that Classic and probably for a few of the others as well. The fishing conditions during that qualifying event on the Arkansas River were so very different (from) what I was accustomed to in Zimbabwe. I’d never fished in a river before with oxbows, backwater areas, current, and locks. I was taken in by the sheer size of it. I was on enough fish there to win, but because of my lack of experience I ended up coming 3rd place.”

His first Classic would also prove to be difficult.

“I was way out of my element in the Classic on High Rock Lake, as the result showed,” he said. “I weighed in a single fish each day and finished second to last. I’d never fished a dock before in my life until that tournament! But I still enjoyed every minute of it.”

Since that 1994 Classic on High Rock, Jooste has fished three others. Here’s what he had to say about some of those experiences.

“The Classics haven’t been kind to me, and the results show that,” he said. “But there have been two highlights – the first being at the Classic in 1994 when Brian won and leading the Classic on day 1 at Lake Logan Martin in 1997. Fishing the Classic obviously means a lot, and being able to qualify for the 5th time is very satisfying – but I would trade any one of them to win the Bryan Kerchal trophy.”

Zimbabwe, being so far from the U.S., only sends a team every other year to the Divisional Championship. On the odd years, they hold their own Zimbabwe Championship in order to decide who will represent the country in the National Championship. Jooste won the 2012 Zimbabwe Federation Angler of the Year, thereby qualifying him for the Federation Nation Nationals on Wheeler Lake. In that tournament he finished 4th overall, winning the Mid-Atlantic division and becoming the first 5-time Classic qualifier.

“Truly, it’s hard to believe I have made it five times,” he said. “My focus in the last 20 years has been on making a living in Zimbabwe and trying to establish a successful boat manufacturing business – not to become a professional angler.

“The bass fishing and catching skills are there – but it takes more than just that to qualify for that many Classics as a Bass Nation angler. Maybe the ability to forget about everything else in your life and just focus on catching quality fish at each tournament is what has helped. Maybe it’s about concentration, and instincts, and figuring out the fish and taking it to the next level.”

Zimbabwe vs. the United States

We’ve all heard the adage, “A Bass is a Bass,” and Jooste says that adage holds true between Zimbabwe and the U.S.

“Even though the conditions in Zimbabwe are very different to conditions in the States, catching bass and the bass behavior is similar and provides a good background for fishing competitively in the States,” he said. “The fishing is good so an angler can hone his skills.

“I don’t think living here in Zimbabwe hinders my ability to learn new techniques that much. The Internet and the amount of information available keeps me up to date to a certain level and the fishing here in Zimbabwe is very good making it possible to experiment with new baits and techniques.”

Asked what he favors technique-wise, his answer was:

“I’m not sure if I have a favorite technique anymore,” he said. “If I was asked the same question 20 years ago the answer would simply be soft plastics. I’ve found that, especially when I’m fishing in the States, I rely more than ever on reaction baits. In Zimbabwe the key is to target big fish, though, and the easiest way to do that is to use big baits. I have probably caught more big fish on a 7” Senko than all the other baits combined.”

Ruffneck Boats

Jooste made mention of his boat manufacturing company and how for the last 20 years that’s been his main focus. Here’s how he got started.

“When I left school it was mandatory to fulfill national service, so I signed up with the Zimbabwe Air Force for 10 years. After that I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. There were some very uncertain times in Zimbabwe. All I did know was that nobody built a quality bass boat in Zimbabwe. So that was the motivation to start building boats. It took a few years to get the boat business going and eventually Ruffnek Boats was registered in 1992.

Looking Ahead

“I am happy where I am at this stage of my life, so I have no new or drastic plans for the future,” he said. “I have three new design changes to complete on our existing boat models that I would like to complete by 2014. Apart from that, I plan to stay fit so that I can stay competitive as long as I possibly can.