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# Gone Fishing on Scholarship, With Hopes of Turning Pro

By JAMES CARD

GIBSON COUNTY LAKE, Tenn. — The college freshmen Jake Lawrence and Jacob Hardy have two priorities: getting good grades and catching big fish. Standing on the deck of a 20-foot-long bass boat on a 560-acre lake in west Tennessee, they almost look like two tanned brothers. They wear the same uniform of flip-flops, wraparound polarized sunglasses, frayed Bethel University ball caps, and fishing shirts plastered with sponsor logos.

They room together, go to school together and fish together. And Bethel University brought them together as the first students in America to receive an athletic scholarship for competitive bass fishing. This week, these boys of summer will make room on their boat for another team member, Lauren Stamps, the first woman in the United States to receive a scholarship for bass fishing and one of a handful of women to compete on the nearly all-male college circuit.

The growth of collegiate bass-fishing tournaments caught the eye of Bethel University in McKenzie, Tenn. There are an estimated 220 college bass-fishing clubs throughout the United States and Canada, according to [collegebass.com](http://collegebass.com), an ESPN-partnered Web site. The Bethel administrators decided that a strong bass-fishing team could be a good recruiting tool, so they officially recognized it as a sport, included it in their athletic department's budget, and hired Garry Mason, a professional hunting and fishing guide, to be their coach. Scholarships range from \$1,000 to \$4,000 a year.

"We're looking for a mix of a background in fishing and good academics," Mason said. "We're not looking for the Michael Jordan of the fishing world."

He believes bass fishing is something that can be mastered by spending a lot of time on the water and by learning from more experienced team members.

In the other boat, Coach Garry — as his student-anglers call him — gave Stamps tips on using a bait-casting reel, while Blake Welch, another freshman team member, pointed out splashy ruffles on the water's surface.

“They’re chasing shad,” he said, and his rod slashed through the air like a fencing saber and he dropped the minnowlike lure within inches of the disturbance. “I’ve been fishing ever since the day I could first hold a rod in my hand.”

Mason has eight students in the program and plans to have 12 to 13 in the lineup. Two students from Alabama and another from Iowa are expected to join the team.

“Bethel was really aggressive in expanding their recruiting to attract students, and for some students, the kicker was joining the bass-fishing team,” Mason said.

Students can now make enrollment decisions based on whether a college has a bass-fishing team.

“I would have loved to receive a scholarship for fishing,” Shayne Chelminiak, a student at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, said in an e-mail message. “As a high school athlete, I received scholarships to play college football, but I turned them down to go to a school near home which had a great academic background but also a fishing team where I could drive home in an hour and be able to fish on the weekends.”

Dan Langton, the president of the Murray State bass angler’s club, said: “I like the idea of the college getting involved and funding their team. Schools do not yet realize the enrollment and recruiting possibilities in this sport. I know of about 10 anglers on our team that came to Murray just because of the fishing team. I get calls and e-mails every week from high school students wanting to know more about our team.”

FLW Outdoors, the largest sanctioning organization for sport fishing tournament tours, just finished its second year organizing college-level bass tournaments.

“We have students now deciding on which college to go to based on the school’s bass-fishing club,” said Charlie Evans, president of FLW.

“It was an out-of-the-park home run,” Evans said of the tournament’s popularity. “These college anglers are unbelievably talented for their age.”

To encourage participation, FLW provides boats for the anglers to use, waives entry fees and offers a travel allowance.

This year, the [University of Florida](#) bass fishing team won the National Guard FLW College Fishing National Championship. The team’s winnings included a new Ranger bass boat, \$25,000 for the bass club, and \$50,000 to be passed on to its university but to be used as bass anglers see fit. Florida used the money to create a scholarship for students in need of financial

assistance.

By winning the national championship, Florida qualified to fish in the Forest Wood Cup, the biggest tournament in competitive bass fishing, in which the winner could take home \$1 million. Evans of FLW likens it to a college baseball player having a chance to play in the World Series.

The Illinois High School Athletic Association recognized bass fishing as a sport in 2009 and this year has 225 schools competing in sectional tournaments and state finals. Other states have expressed interest in the sport, and Alabama started a tournament series this year with 20 schools competing.

In theory, a student could fish on a high school team, then compete on a top college bass-fishing team and garner some titles. By graduation time, the angler could have the skill, reputation, and savvy to attract sponsors and turn professional.

It is a path Jake Lawrence and Jacob Hardy have considered more than a few times.

In hourslong conversations, they have discussed the idea while on trips between bass tournaments this spring. They learned how tough the bass fishing circuit can be and they have experienced the cheap hotels, predawn wake-up calls, and fishing in foul weather. In February, they fished in two inches of snow at Lake Guntersville in Alabama, and Hardy slipped and fell overboard into the icy water. He fished the rest of the day in borrowed clothing.

“It’s both a dream of ours,” Hardy said. “We’re hoping that through college bass fishing, we can have a foot in the door for sponsors.”

Lawrence tied on a coffee-scented Rage Tail Thumper, a lure that resembles a baby garter snake jabbed with a large hook, and cast into a creek bed on the bottom of the lake that is invisible to the naked eye but evident with side-scan sonar and depth finders.

“Ever since I learned how to fish, that’s all I ever thought about,” he said. “I don’t know if there’s any better way to do it with this opportunity we’ve been given.”