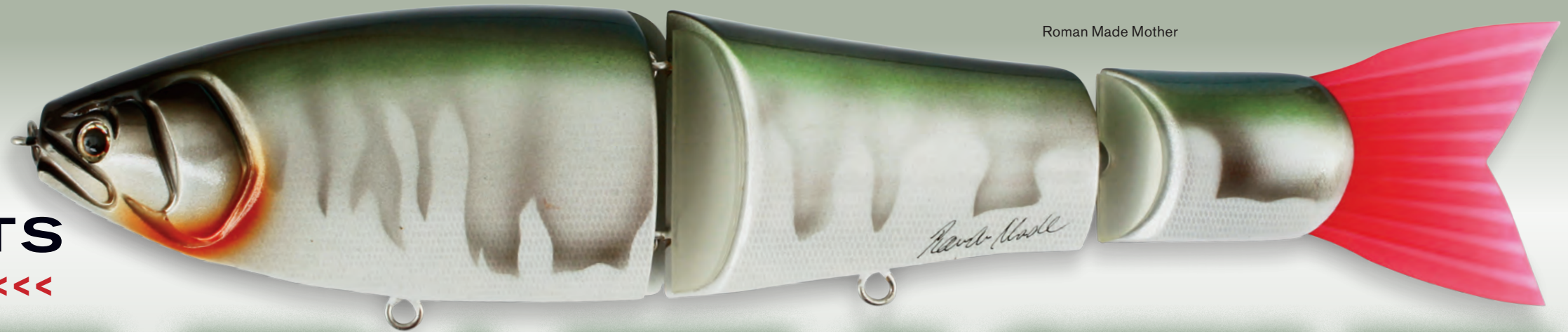




**DRUMBEATS
>>> ON THE <<<**

SWIMBAIT SCENE



► **In-Fisherman published the first expose on swimbaits in 1995**, with Field Editor Matt's Straw's feature, "It's a Trout; It's a Submarine!" It chronicled the garage production of giant wooden jointed swimbaits, such as Alan Cole's A.C. Plug, beginning around 1987.

¶ We've covered the rise of hollow-belly swimbaits, heralded by Bruce Porter's Basstrix Fat Minnow Paddle Tails with a slit belly that enabled lifelike action and made hooking bass easier. YUM's Money Minnow, Berkley's Hollow Belly Swim Bait, Strike King's Shadalicious, and others followed and anglers recorded great catches with them. Today, this category has declined in popularity, though I still catch loads of big bass on them, Texas-rigged in shallow cover or on jigheads around deep structure. When Berkley ceased production of the Hollow Belly a couple years ago, I made sure I had cases of baits stored. The attraction of these lures does not go away. Nor does the attraction of solid-body boot-tails. Witness the success of Alabama-born Scottsboro Tackle Company's Swimbait, which Tennessean Jay Kendrick parlayed to victory on Lake Guntersville in Alabama at an FLW Series competition early last spring.

Other categories of swimbaits included internally weighted boot-tail baits, such as Storm's WildEye series, Jackall's Swimmin' Ninja, and Berkley's PowerBait Swim Shad, to name a few. These originated in California as Ken Huddleston adjusted internal weight to alter the Rate Of Fall (ROF). Huddleston motivated the move toward massive softbaits, sometimes labeled "big rubber." His Deluxe line ranged from 8 to 12 inches, with larger models weighing more than half a pound. Other notable baits included Castaic Soft Baits Platinum Series, Alan Cole's A.C. Plug Casitas, Jerry Rago's Line Through Series, and several models from Optimum Baits. These lures continue to tempt many of the year's largest bass across the country. And when the Alabama Rig exploded on to the scene, small swimmers became the rage, imitating a school of small baitfish on umbrella setups. These baits also fish extremely well on a jighead or as trailers on spinnerbaits, swim jigs, or bladed jigs.

Soft Swimmers Today

Anglers have embraced the swimbait category to a greater extent than ever, and we see a wide range

of lure styles and uses for them. At the annual ICAST Show last summer, industry veterans were wowed by several gigantic new soft swimbaits, topped by the 16-inch Savage Gear Mads Mega Pre Rigged Trout. Though it's rigged with a leader, so likely intended for giant pike, muskies, or offshore toothy critters, some California big bass hunters were drooling as they draped the giant lure across their palms. Looking all the world like a 2-pound rainbow trout, it's fit to fry.

George Coniglio of Mission, Viejo, California, knows how to catch big bass. His largest weighed 19.7 pounds, caught on Lake Mission Viejo in California. Though he plucked that one from a bed, he's been a fan of swimbaits for many years, fishing many models in the lakes of the West Coast and beyond. "Many of the jointed soft swimbaits I fished produced realistic action only in a narrow window of retrieve speeds," he says. "Some looked good on a slow pull, but started to flap wildly in a S-wave when you cranked faster. If you look at trout, shad, or other preyfish, their movements are highly efficient but subtle.

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"I started working on a lure over two years ago. My neighbors undoubtedly thought I'd lost it, as I stood for hours on my dock, making short casts; then tweaking the lure; with nary a fish in sight and my Ranger tied to the dock! I felt that a moderate-size lure would have the greatest application across the country, and would appeal to bass of all sizes that feed on shiners, shad, and other baitfish.

"I studied fluid dynamics to understand the forces that cause a lure to move under water. I learned that inserting clear plastic control planes vertically and horizontally into the body creates a natural swimming action at slow, medium, and fast retrieves. With my partner at Dominion Lures, Marc Estrada, we began working with a patent attorney. We have a patent covering the insertion of clear plastic control planes in each segment of a soft-plastic swimbait and more patents in the works. While field-testing it, I was fortunate to catch what's now the all-tackle length record for largemouth bass (65 cm from nose to fork), ironically surpassing one caught by lure designer Patrick Sebile in Florida."

This double-jointed lure is made of Thermoplastic Elastomer for a combination of toughness and fluid

motion, packaged with a treble hook and slipsinker for rigging. Its vertical and horizontal control planes can be adjusted to maintain stability at any speed. I've tested this 4½-inch lure and it does indeed possess a unique ability to mimic a fish at a wide range of speeds. Packs include extra control planes and instructions.

Mann's Bait Company has introduced another unique soft swimmer, the Reel 'N Shad, originally designed by Ron Walter. Looking superficially like a fluke-style lure, it has a key feature—a slot that runs from top to bottom in the middle of the lure. When pulled, the slot opens, and water generates a natural swimming action and tail kick on a straight retrieve. Mike McPherson, Operation Manager at Mann's, explains: "When Walter showed me his video, it was an 'aha' moment," he says. "Its action was amazing. We tweaked the original design to go from concept to product, lengthening the slot, slimming its side-walls and adjusting durometer of the plastic to achieve maximum action."

The company released 3.75- and 5.25-inch versions in 2015 and 9-inch Monster Reel 'N Shad for 2016. Baits come with a specially designed jighead—smaller ones with a jighead

with a guard, and a 7/16-ounce jig with 8/0 Mustad for the Monster so it can be Texposed. This one can be retrieved steadily or worked with a pull-pause cadence to tease big predators into striking. As with the Dominion Swimmbait, check the website for videos.

Jointed Glide Baits

Perhaps the hottest swimbait category is the large trout-shaped baits of wood or plastic, with a joint to allow lifelike motion. Jointed swimbaits are far from new, as the classic A.C. Plug was of this basic design, though with a soft-plastic boot-tail and lacking the ultra-realistic scale details and coloration of today's baits. One spur for the recent rise in their popularity was the appearance of the Roman Made baits in 2009. These beautifully painted wood lures were designed by owner Toshinori Takeyama, a lifelong angler who grew up near Japan's legendary Lake Biwa. As an avid fish watcher and angler, he studied the fluid movements of fish and began to try designing lures that moved naturally, unlike many mechanical-acting hardbaits he tried. He established his company in 2006.

"After working with lure shapes and observing their movements, it

became clear that the key to these lures lies in their ability to direct the flow of water around them," Takeyama says. "The head region is particularly important as it parts the water. But the other jointed segments also create currents in different ways." Roman Made offers eight swimbait styles, each with a unique manner of swimming and gliding through the water. They range in cost from \$140 to \$450. The most recognized is the 11.8-inch, 10.5-ounce Mother, hand-carved like a salmonid. Each one is tank-tuned to run perfectly and takes 12 hours to produce. This lure became a favorite for Manabu Kurita, co-holder of the all-tackle record largemouth, caught

in Lake Biwa. He used a Mother to catch the 18-pound former lake record there. He and other swimbait experts emphasize that the very size that turns many anglers off has the potential to turn on the biggest bass in any body of water, sometimes even summoning schools of giants.

Lure designer and veteran lunker hunter Bill Siemantel of Castaic, California, also has spent lots of time studying lure designs and how physical properties cause lures to move, which is what causes bass to bite. "The power of swimbaits lies in their large sphere of influence," he says. "That's particularly true for articulated baits that glide from one side to the other when retrieved

erratically, in the manner of a walk-the-dog surface bait. But, depending on design, they perform that deadly action near the surface, mid-water, or down deep. When I designed the BBZ-1 for SPRO, I made lures with three sink rates for that reason."

Several other jointed baits have gained fans as well, including the Daps Slide Swimmer, River2Sea S-Waver, Evergreen International Timberflash, 3:16 Bait Company Glide Swimbait, and Megabass I-Slide. New for 2016 is the DUO Realis Onimasu, the first product in company owner and designer Masahiro Adashi's Prometheus Project, which promises more exciting swimbaits in the near future. Onimasu is a shallow-running lure that slowly rises when the retrieve is halted. Company representative David Swendseid explains: "Most glidebaits are built for working

Jointed Gliders



Biovex Joint Bait 142



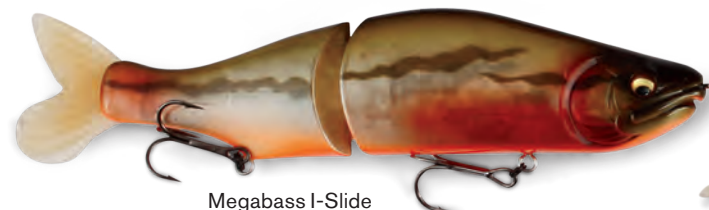
SPRO BBZ-1 Shad



SPRO BBZ-1 Jr.



Bull Shad



Megabass I-Slide



Savage Gear 4Play Herring Swim & Jerk



DUO Realis Onimasu



22nd Century Swimbait Company Triple Trout

Swimbait Softies



Mann's Bait Company Reel 'N Shad (3.75-inch and Monster)



Dominion Lures Swimbait



Savage Gear Mads Mega Pre Rigged Trout

SWIMBAITS

slowly, either in a steady cadence that moves the lure in a S-pattern, or with sudden snaps that cause the lure to turn and dart. Onimasu performs these maneuvers but can be worked fast as well as slowly. That snakelike action with a tail kick provided by its soft tail section has proven deadly from California to Alabama. And one neat feature is that you get can it to run down to at least 5 feet by what I call 'tumbling,' snapping the rod downward, which causes the lure to dive a bit, then run deeper."

Despite the similarity of jointed swimbaits to the uninitiated, each of these lures fishes differently, offering more subtle or aggressive action, different sink rates, and ability to execute directional changes. Subtle variations can make a lot of difference in bass response.

Megabass president Yuki Ito designed the I-Slide 185 to solve a vexing issue with big



» Josh Douglas of Minnesota has found the Biovex Joint Bait deadly for largemouth, smallmouth, and spotted bass.

baits—converting followers. While the lure moves in a smooth S-shaped motion when steadily retrieved, sharply snapping it forward, then throwing slack line toward the lure

makes it spin completely around to face a following bass, a move that rarely fails to elicit a strike. This motion is enabled by the asymmetric placement of weights inside the lure.

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Ito also added magnets to the body to hold hooks in place next to the body while it's fished, to streamline action and to look more lifelike. It also helps keep hooks from tangling the line when the lure makes its dramatic turn. Its density is adjusted so it slowly sinks at 50°F, suspends at 55°F, slowly rises at 59°F, and floats at 68°F, generally matching the mood of bass at those temperature ranges.

Bassmaster Elite pro Brandon Palaniuk of Idaho has been a fan of big hard-body, jointed swimbaits, starting about 10 years ago. "Folks think of California as the home of giant bass, and that's true," Palaniuk says. "But we have a lot of big ones here in Idaho, too. In many waters, they feed on trout and kokanee salmon, which helps them pack on pounds, and causes them to feed offshore. I've been intrigued by studying how each of these baits works, as they're far more complicated than a crankbait."

Palaniuk should know as he's on the design team for Storm Lures, and contributed greatly in producing the Storm Arashi Square Bill, which has become a big hit in that category. "I've been working with Storm on a design that will perform like the Roman Made baits, but at a fraction of the price," he says. "I've learned there are many details involved in the balance and construction of these lures to get them right. It takes time."

This style of swimbait has traditionally been used from fall into early spring, times when bass tend to hold offshore on deep structure and feed on large preyfish in temperate waters. But where bass feed on large gizzard shad along the ledges of riverine impoundments, they can also work well in summer, in addition to waters where blueback herring are a prime prey. On the Savannah River impoundments such as Hartwell and Clarks Hill on the Georgia-South Carolina border, these big baits are deadly on shallow flats in early summer. Their slaloming action makes the lure look vulnerable and their size make big bass react.

Multi-Jointed Teasers

Added joints increase flexibility and lifelike movement. The Joint Bait from Biovex was designed by company owner Katsushi Umeda and fellow designer Hiroto Kusaba. It was

released to the U.S. market last summer at the ICAST Show. The Joint Bait (4½- and 6-inch models) is a floater with four sections. It moves sinuously at the surface or just below it, creating a wake. Josh Douglas of Minnesota is a rising star in tournament fishing and a member of Biovex's pro staff. In shad-based fisheries, he uses it in place of a standard topwater lure like a Zara Spook or popper. "And it's deadly in rivers," he adds, "especially in fall when the water's clearer."

It's a versatile, realistic-size lure that I've used to catch largemouths, smallmouths, and spotted bass."

One of several hot new swimbaits to arise in the East is Mike "Triton Mike" Bucca's Bull Shad, a four-piece bait shaped like an adult gizzard shad. Bucca, a highly touted spotted bass guide on Georgia's Lake Allatoona, noticed that whenever he or his clients boated a big spotted bass or outside largemouth, it often had the big forked

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tail of a gizzard shad sticking out of its gullet. "I began using some western trout-style baits," he says. "But by 2006, I wanted to make a shad bait so a friend and I got some wood and started carving. Once I got a working model, I made a mold and learned how to make lures of resin.

"My intent in building the lure was to have my clients catch more big fish, but I eventually started selling them locally and to clients who saw how well they worked. Word spread about the Bull Shad and demand grew. I moved to new quarters with a large garage and it got so busy I couldn't find time to guide anymore.

"The Bull Shad has accounted for many big tournament wins and I have a large warehouse and five employees that work on the 150

molds we've built. I make two styles, shad and herring, with the shad baits running from 5 to 11 inches. The herring are 6 inches long. We have baits with three rates of fall: floater, slow sink, and fast sink, and various color combinations, too." Savage Gear has added the 4Play Herring Swim & Jerk in three sizes, 3¾-, 5½-, and 7½-inch. Depending on line choice and retrieve, it runs between the surface and 8 feet deep. Though built like a European herring, its S-Curve is tempting to predators of all sorts.

Sunfish Swimbaits

In many waters, bass feed heavily on bluegills and other sunfish species from early spring and into autumn, when big bass bust schools of 2-inch fingerlings holding among

the last green plants of fall. And in late spring, guardian bass are especially aggressive toward nest-robbing sunnies. And when it's the bluegills' turn to bed, bass give them no rest, holding near nest colonies to pick off love-starved leptomids.

Sunfish swimbaits generally fall into two categories—soft-body swimmers with a boot-tail or jointed baits. Examples of the soft style are Little Creeper Baits' All American Trash Sunfish, a realistic shaped lure with a boot-tail, and Storm's WildEye Live Bluegill and Live Redear, shaped and colored naturally, with boot-tail, belly treble, and single hook on top, in 2- and 3-inch sizes. These baits can be worked around bluegill beds or over vegetated flats where bass often attack small bluegills from spring into fall. Jackall offers the Swimming Ninja G90, which mimics a 3½-inch, 3/4-ounce bluegill with a thumping tail, and the Clone Gill, with realistic coloration and body details. It's a 2.5-incher for drop-shotting in vegetation pockets or on bass beds.

Jointed hardbaits offer the profile of sunfish, with the darting action of jointed baits. Jackall's Giron, a 4-inch sinker that has a tail-kicking action and realistic hues, and their latest Gantarel and Gantarel Jr. (2½- and 1½-ounce), have a jointed body and fine features, plus a bearing swivel at the line tie to prevent line twist. The Gantarel works on a slow steady retrieve, but also pivots 180 degree to the side when given a sharp twitch, a deadly trigger for bass that follow, a common phenomenon with big baits in clear water.

Biovex's Joint Gill is a 3-piece, 3½-inch bluegill bait with precise body colors and scale patterns. Douglas uses it for postspawn bass that cruise the shallows in search of spawning sunfish.

The swimbait category continues to grow, offering an array of new lure styles that fish well in many situations. The key is learning the retrieve nuances that turn these hunks of wood and plastic in to magical fish catchers. While some fish best at a super-slow steady retrieve, others come to life with twitches and turns you perform like a puppeteer, controlling rod and line and ultimately, the desire of big bass to bite. ■

► Sunfish Simulators

