



SC BASS NATION YOUTH SERIES

FISH CARE, CONSERVATION & LOW-WATER BOATING SAFETY MANUAL

A Message to Our Anglers, Coaches and Boat Captains

Before we talk about catching fish, tournament standings, trophies, or winning, we need to talk about something that is more important than all of those things:

Taking care of the resource.

Every fish that enters your boat is a living animal that you have taken responsibility for.

When you catch a bass during one of our tournaments, your responsibility does not end when the fish goes into the livewell. In fact, that is when your responsibility begins.

Our goal is simple:

Catch the fish. Keep it healthy. Handle it properly. Get it to the scales safely. And return it to the lake in the best condition possible.

Tournament fishing and conservation are not opposing ideas. Properly conducted tournaments can educate young anglers about fisheries management and responsible use of the resource. B.A.S.S. has spent decades developing fish-care practices specifically to improve survival of tournament-caught bass. ([Bassmaster](#))

But those practices only work when **everyone does their part.**

A tournament director cannot save a fish that has been improperly handled for six hours.

A weigh-in crew cannot undo hours of poor livewell management.

And a coach cannot teach conservation if the boat captain and anglers are not practicing it.

Fish care is a team responsibility.

PART I — THE FIVE RULES OF FISH CARE

I want every angler to remember five basic principles.

1. MINIMIZE STRESS

2. MAINTAIN OXYGEN

3. CONTROL TEMPERATURE

4. HANDLE FISH PROPERLY

5. MONITOR YOUR FISH

If you remember those five things, you will prevent a tremendous number of fish-care problems.

STEP 1 — BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE RAMP

Fish care begins **before the first fish is caught**.

Check your livewell.

Before launching, verify:

- Livewell pumps work.
- Recirculation pumps work.
- Aerators work.
- Intake screens are clear.
- Drain plugs operate properly.
- Livewell lids close properly.
- There are no leaks.
- The system can fill and recirculate water.
- Your boat has enough livewell capacity for your expected catch.
- You have a working thermometer.
- You have ice available when conditions require it.
- Any approved livewell treatment you use is available and used according to its label.

B.A.S.S. specifically emphasizes that livewell equipment should be functional and capable of maintaining the fish throughout the tournament. ([Bassmaster](#))

Clean your livewell.

A dirty livewell can become a serious fish-health problem.

Remove:

- Old bait
- Dead vegetation
- Fish waste
- Regurgitated forage

- Dirt and debris
- Old chemical residue

The livewell should be clean before the tournament starts. ([Bassmaster](#))

Know your switches.

This sounds simple, but it matters.

Every boat captain should know:

Which switch fills the livewell?

Which switch recirculates?

Which switch aerates?

Which switch drains?

Do not wait until you have five fish in the boat to figure it out.

STEP 2 — CATCH THE FISH CORRECTLY

Once you hook a fish, fish care starts immediately.

Don't unnecessarily exhaust the fish.

Get the fish to the boat efficiently.

Do not intentionally play a fish to exhaustion simply because you want a picture or because you're enjoying the fight.

Land the fish carefully.

If a landing net is permitted, a **soft rubber or vinyl-coated net** is preferred over hard knotted mesh. ([Bassmaster](#))

Avoid unnecessarily boat-flipping fish.

A fish hitting the deck can damage:

- Its jaw
- Its scales
- Its protective slime coat
- Its internal organs

Protect the slime coat.

The slime coat is one of the fish's primary defenses against infection.

Wet your hands before touching the fish.

Do not handle a bass with dry hands.

Do not drag it across carpet.

Do not allow it to flop around on the deck.

B.A.S.S. specifically recommends protecting the slime coat and minimizing handling. ([Bassmaster](#))

STEP 3 — REMOVE THE HOOK QUICKLY

Once the fish is in the boat:

Get the hook out.

Do not leave the fish out of water while you take pictures, admire it, or search for pliers.

Have your tools ready.

Every boat should have:

- Pliers
- Hook removal tool
- Line cutters
- Appropriate measuring device
- Cull system if required
- Fish-care supplies

If a fish is hooked deeply:

Do not repeatedly dig around inside the fish trying to save a hook at all costs.

The priority is to minimize additional injury.

If the fish is bleeding heavily or has suffered significant injury, immediately place it into the livewell and begin monitoring it.

STEP 4 — GET THE FISH INTO THE LIVEWELL

Once the fish is secured:

Get it into the livewell immediately.

Don't leave it on the deck.

Don't leave it hanging from a culling clip while you continue fishing.

Don't put it in a bucket.

Don't put it in a dry measuring tray.

The livewell is designed to provide:

- Oxygen
- Water
- Temperature control
- Protection from physical injury

B.A.S.S. recommends keeping livewells full and dividing fish between wells when possible because greater water volume provides more available oxygen per fish. ([Bassmaster](#))

STEP 5 — LIVEWELL MANAGEMENT

This is where many fish-care failures occur.

Simply putting fish in a livewell **does not mean they are being cared for.**

You have to manage the water.

There are three major factors:

OXYGEN

TEMPERATURE

WATER QUALITY

OXYGEN

Fish consume oxygen.

The warmer the water becomes, the more difficult the situation becomes because warm water holds less dissolved oxygen while fish metabolism increases.

Your aeration system needs to be operating properly.

B.A.S.S. recommends continuous aeration/recirculation under many tournament conditions, particularly as temperatures rise. ([Bassmaster](#))

Do not rely blindly on an automatic timer.

Know what your livewell is actually doing.

If you have a heavy fish load, hot water, or stressed fish:

Monitor the situation and increase aeration/recirculation as appropriate.

TEMPERATURE CONTROL

Temperature is one of the most important factors affecting tournament fish survival.

B.A.S.S. guidance recommends cooling livewell water when water temperatures become elevated, but cautions against excessive cooling or sudden temperature changes. Current *Keeping Bass Alive* guidance recommends keeping livewell water no more than approximately **10°F below lake temperature.** ([Bassmaster](#))

That means:

Do not dump huge amounts of ice into your livewell simply because the water feels warm.

Measure it.

Use a thermometer.

Control it.

Example:

If the lake is 85°F, you don't want to suddenly turn the livewell into 65°F water.

The objective is **controlled temperature management**, not making the water as cold as possible.

Too much cooling can create temperature shock and contribute to delayed mortality. ([Bassmaster](#))

ICE — USE IT INTELLIGENTLY

Ice can be an important fish-care tool.

But:

ICE IS MEDICINE — NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR PROPER LIVEWELL MANAGEMENT.

Ice does not replace:

- Aeration
- Water quality
- Monitoring
- Proper fish handling
- Appropriate water exchanges

Use ice gradually and monitor the temperature.

Do not simply dump bag after bag of ice into the livewell.

B.A.S.S. specifically warns against excessive cooling because it can contribute to fish mortality after release. ([Bassmaster](#))

WATER QUALITY

Fish don't just consume oxygen.

They also produce waste.

As fish remain in the livewell, ammonia and other waste products accumulate.

That is another reason water management is critical.

Under appropriate conditions, fresh water exchanges can help maintain water quality. However, when surface water becomes extremely warm, indiscriminately pumping hot surface water into the livewell can make conditions worse.

This is why anglers must understand **how and when to use their livewell system**, rather than simply leaving a switch in one position all day. ([Bassmaster](#))

STEP 6 — CHECK YOUR FISH REGULARLY

This is one of the most important requirements I would emphasize to every team.

CHECK YOUR FISH AT LEAST EVERY 30 MINUTES.

Don't assume they're okay because they're swimming.

Open the livewell.

Look at every fish.

Ask:

- Is the fish upright?
- Is it swimming normally?
- Is it responsive?
- Is it rolling over?
- Is it floating?
- Is it gasping?
- Is it lethargic?
- Is it showing signs of stress?
- Is its belly excessively distended?
- Is it bleeding?
- Is it acting differently from the other fish?

If something looks wrong:

Do something immediately.

Do not wait until weigh-in.

Early intervention gives the fish the best chance of recovery.

STEP 7 — RECOGNIZE BAROTRAUMA

Some fish, particularly those caught from deeper water, may suffer from **barotrauma**.

This occurs when rapid changes in pressure cause problems with the fish's swim bladder and ability to maintain equilibrium.

Watch for:

- Fish unable to remain upright
- Floating at the surface
- Distended abdomen
- Bulging eyes
- Difficulty swimming downward
- Fish rolling on its side

DO NOT IGNORE THESE SIGNS.

If a fish is showing signs of barotrauma, appropriate fizzing may be necessary.

However:

Fizzing is not a technique that should be performed casually or by someone who has never been properly trained.

Incorrect fizzing can injure or kill a fish.

Anglers should receive proper instruction in an accepted fizzing procedure before attempting it. B.A.S.S. specifically recommends addressing overinflated swim bladders promptly and emphasizes proper fizzing technique. ([Bassmaster](#))

Important:

A weighted fin clip is NOT a substitute for treating barotrauma.

B.A.S.S. specifically notes that weighted clips do not cure the underlying problem. ([Bassmaster](#))

STEP 8 — CULLING

When culling:

Keep the fish in the livewell.

Do not lay bass on the carpet while determining which fish to remove.

Use **non-puncturing culling devices** that do not damage the fish. ([Bassmaster](#))

Handle the fish as little as possible.

The objective is to replace a smaller fish with a larger fish while causing as little additional stress as possible.

STEP 9 — PREPARING FOR WEIGH-IN

The final 30 minutes before weigh-in are critical.

Don't wait until the last minute to inspect your fish.

Before leaving your fishing area:

1. Check every fish.
2. Make sure the livewell is functioning.
3. Verify aeration.
4. Verify temperature.
5. Make sure all fish are upright and responsive.
6. Make sure your livewell is adequately filled.
7. Secure your livewell lids.

Then begin your trip to the check-in.

STEP 10 — TRANSPORTING FISH TO THE WEIGH-IN

This is particularly important on large lakes and rough water.

A livewell that is only partially full allows fish to be thrown around as the boat travels.

B.A.S.S. has specifically highlighted the importance of minimizing livewell sloshing and maintaining adequate water volume during rough-water travel. ([Bassmaster](#))

Slow down when necessary.

Your fish are passengers too.

If you're running across rough water at high speed and your livewell is throwing fish around, you're creating unnecessary stress and physical trauma.

Getting to the weigh-in 60 seconds faster is not worth killing a fish.

STEP 11 — WEIGH-IN BAG PROCEDURE

When you arrive:

Follow tournament instructions.

Use the tournament-provided weigh-in bag when required.

B.A.S.S. guidance recommends filling the weigh-in bag with **at least two gallons of livewell water**, rather than using warm water from around the boat. ([Bassmaster](#))

Minimize air exposure.

Once the fish leave the livewell:

Move them efficiently.

Do not hold them out of water unnecessarily.

Do not take extended photographs.

Do not stand around showing everyone your fish.

The fish have already been through enough stress.

STEP 12 — HANDLING BASS AT THE WEIGH-IN

Small bass:

Hold them vertically by the lower jaw when appropriate.

Large bass:

Support the fish with two hands.

One hand supports the jaw while the other supports the body.

Never hold a large bass horizontally by the lower jaw alone.

B.A.S.S. recommends two-handed support for larger bass to reduce stress and potential jaw injury. ([Bassmaster](#))

STEP 13 — AFTER THE WEIGH-IN

Once the fish have been officially weighed:

The tournament is not over for the fish.

The fish still need to survive.

Our goal is not simply:

"The fish were alive when we weighed them."

Our goal is:

"The fish were returned to the lake healthy enough to survive."

Tournament fish can experience **delayed mortality** even when they appear healthy at weigh-in. Water temperature, handling injuries, low oxygen and other stressors can contribute to mortality after release. ([Bassmaster](#))

That is why every step matters.

PART II — WHAT NOT TO DO

I want these things to be absolutely clear.

DO NOT:

- Throw fish onto the deck.
 - Let fish flop on dry carpet.
 - Handle fish with dry hands.
 - Leave fish out of water unnecessarily.
 - Leave fish hanging from culling devices.
 - Ignore a fish that is floating or rolling.
 - Dump excessive ice into the livewell.
 - Turn off aeration because the fish "look okay."
 - Allow a livewell to become overcrowded.
 - Transport fish in a partially filled livewell during rough conditions if it can be avoided.
 - Wait until weigh-in to discover a problem.
 - Attempt unfamiliar fish-care procedures without proper training.
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PART III — THE COACH AND BOAT CAPTAIN'S RESPONSIBILITY

Coaches and boat captains have a tremendous responsibility.

The student anglers may be learning tournament fishing for the first time.

They are watching you.

If you treat fish care as a nuisance, they will learn that fish care is a nuisance.

If you treat fish care as part of being a professional angler, they will learn that too.

Before the tournament:

Teach your anglers:

- How the livewell works.
- How to monitor temperature.
- How to identify stressed fish.
- How to properly handle bass.
- How to use culling equipment.
- What barotrauma looks like.
- When to seek help.
- What to do if a fish becomes distressed.

During the tournament:

Check the fish.

Don't assume the students are doing it.

Make fish care a scheduled responsibility.

For example:

Every 30 minutes — LIVEWELL CHECK.

PART IV — LOW-WATER BOATING SAFETY

Now I want to address another issue that is equally important:

LOW WATER.

When a lake experiences prolonged drought or significantly reduced water levels, **the lake you know is no longer necessarily the lake you are operating on.**

A lake that was safely navigable at normal pool may contain hazards that are much closer to the surface—or completely exposed—when water levels fall.

These hazards can include:

- Rock piles
- Stumps
- Standing timber
- Gravel bars
- Sandbars
- Mud flats
- Old roadbeds
- Fence lines
- Docks
- Bridge structures
- Unmarked obstructions
- Shallow points
- Exposed islands
- Narrowed channels

And the most dangerous part is that **many of these hazards may not be visible at speed.**

LOW-WATER RULE #1

SLOW DOWN.

This is the most important rule.

When water levels are unusually low:

Do not operate your boat as if the lake were at normal pool.

A GPS map does not give you permission to run at full speed.

A marked channel does not guarantee that every hazard is marked.

The U.S. Coast Guard specifically notes that aids to navigation are not intended to identify every shoal or obstruction in navigable waters. ([USCG Boating](#))

LOW-WATER RULE #2

KNOW WHERE YOU ARE.

Before the tournament:

- Check current lake levels.
- Review the latest navigation information.
- Study your mapping system.
- Identify known hazard areas.
- Look for channel changes.
- Understand where the old shoreline was.
- Know where ramps and access points are affected.
- Ask local authorities or lake personnel about known hazards.

Most importantly:

Do not assume yesterday's route is today's route.

Water levels can change the safe route.

LOW-WATER RULE #3

USE YOUR ELECTRONICS — BUT DON'T TRUST THEM BLINDLY.

GPS and mapping technology are tools.

They are not crystal balls.

A map may show:

"This is the channel."

But the actual lake may have changed.

Depth maps can be based on surveys taken at different water levels.

Some hazards may not be accurately represented.

Therefore:

Electronics + eyes + judgment = safe navigation.

Not electronics alone.

LOW-WATER RULE #4

KEEP A LOOKOUT.

The Coast Guard emphasizes maintaining a proper lookout and operating at a safe speed based on visibility, traffic, maneuverability and conditions. ([USCG Boating](#))

On low water, that means the driver needs to be looking ahead.

Not:

- Looking down at the graph constantly.
- Looking at a phone.
- Talking to a passenger.
- Watching another boat.
- Looking behind the boat.

Look ahead.

If possible, designate the passenger as an additional lookout.

Two sets of eyes are better than one.

LOW-WATER RULE #5

DON'T RUN WHAT YOU HAVEN'T PRE-RUN.

If you have never safely navigated an area at the current water level:

Don't assume it is safe because you have run it before.

If practical, idle through questionable areas first.

Learn the route.

Mark hazards on your GPS.

Then make your decision about whether it is safe to run.

LOW-WATER RULE #6

PROTECT THE PEOPLE BEFORE THE BOAT.

If you hit an obstruction:

The boat can be repaired.

The lower unit can be replaced.

The propeller can be replaced.

The fishing trip can be replaced.

A person cannot be replaced.

No tournament position is worth taking an unnecessary risk.

LOW-WATER RULE #7

WEAR YOUR PFD.

This becomes especially important when conditions increase the likelihood of an accident.

The U.S. Coast Guard recommends wearing a U.S. Coast Guard-approved wearable PFD whenever the boat is underway. ([USCG Boating](#))

For our youth anglers, this should be treated as more than a legal requirement.

It is a life-saving piece of equipment.

If you're running the boat:

Your PFD should be on.

If you're riding in the boat:

Your PFD should be on.

Don't wait until something goes wrong.

LOW-WATER RULE #8

WEAR YOUR KILL SWITCH LANYARD.

If the boat operator is thrown from the driver's position, the engine needs to stop.

The kill switch is designed for exactly that situation.

Wear it.

Not because somebody might check it.

Wear it because you might need it.

LOW-WATER RULE #9

REDUCE SPEED IN UNKNOWN WATER.

At high speed, you have very little time to react.

At idle speed, you have much more control.

When approaching:

- A point
- A creek mouth
- A flat
- A narrow channel
- An unfamiliar area
- A visible obstruction
- A shallow-water warning
- An area with exposed structure

Back out of the throttle.

LOW-WATER RULE #10

DON'T FOLLOW ANOTHER BOAT BLINDLY.

Just because another boat made it through doesn't mean you will.

They may:

- Have a different draft.
- Have a different propeller.
- Know the area better.
- Be following a different route.
- Have hit something without you knowing it.

Maintain your own situational awareness.

LOW-WATER RULE #11

WEATHER + LOW WATER = ADDITIONAL RISK

Low water is not the only consideration.

Combine low water with:

- Wind
- Rain
- Fog
- Darkness
- Heavy boat traffic
- Rough water
- Poor visibility

and the risk increases.

The Coast Guard advises boaters to maintain safe speeds and account for visibility, traffic, weather and vessel maneuverability. ([USCG Boating](#))

PART V — THE "STOP AND THINK" RULE

I want every boat captain to remember this:

IF SOMETHING DOESN'T LOOK RIGHT — STOP.

You are never required to prove that you can make it through.

You are never required to take the shortest route.

You are never required to run wide open because another boat did.

You are never required to risk your passengers for a fishing spot.

Stop.

Evaluate.

Find another route.

Continue only when it is safe.

PART VI — THE TOURNAMENT DIRECTOR'S EXPECTATION

Our expectation is that every person associated with this tournament trail understands that:

Fish care is not optional.

Boating safety is not optional.

Conservation is not optional.

We are not simply trying to conduct a tournament.

We are trying to develop **responsible anglers**.

The students fishing these tournaments today are going to become:

- Tournament anglers
- Boat captains
- Coaches
- Fisheries advocates
- Lake users
- Parents
- Future leaders of the sport

What they learn today will influence how they treat the resource for decades.

FINAL MESSAGE TO THE ANGLERS

I want to finish with this.

You may remember who won a tournament.

You may remember the biggest bass you caught.

You may remember the trophy.

But I want you to remember something else:

Every fish you catch is your responsibility.

You don't get to choose whether fish care matters because you're having a good day.

You don't get to decide that a fish isn't important because it's not the biggest fish in your livewell.

You don't get to decide that getting back to the weigh-in faster is more important than the condition of your fish.

And you don't get to decide that a dangerous boat run is worth it because you're trying to win a tournament.

Winning is important.

But **how you win is more important.**

If we teach young anglers that the resource comes first, then we have accomplished something much bigger than winning a fishing tournament.

We have taught them how to be stewards.

THE SC BASS NATION FISH CARE PLEDGE

I will respect the fish I catch.

I will handle every fish carefully.

I will protect the fish's slime coat.

I will minimize air exposure.

I will maintain proper livewell oxygen and temperature.

I will check my fish regularly.

I will act immediately when a fish shows signs of distress.

I will follow proper tournament fish-care procedures.

I will operate my boat safely and responsibly.

I will respect low-water hazards and never take unnecessary risks.

I will put the safety of my teammates and passengers ahead of catching another fish.

I will leave the lake in better condition than I found it.

I am responsible for the resource.

I am responsible for my boat.

I am responsible for my actions.

And I will represent SC Bass Nation with sportsmanship, safety and conservation.

"WE DON'T JUST CATCH FISH — WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM AFTER WE CATCH THEM."