



# Fish-meister

The perfect cast. The perfect reel technique. Lots of patience. . . . All good—but the *first* thing a pro fisher needs to know is *how to find 'em*.

Davy Hite has that figured out.

**H**ad Davy Hite realized his high school dream, he'd have become a pro football quarterback. Instead, he turned pro in a different sport. The media haven't glamorized this one to nearly the extent of the NFL. Still, Hite has garnered championships and earnings in his chosen realm that outstrip those of many a pigskin professional. In the process, he's been subjected to none of their physical abuses—unless we count sunburn.

Hite has made South Carolina proud by proving himself one of the best bass fishermen on any lake. A lifelong outdoor lover who grew up in Saluda County on the headwaters of Lake Murray, he now lives with

his wife Natalie and two sons on 500 acres of timberland, watered by ponds and streams, near Ninety Six, a mile from Lake Greenwood. Bass fishing enthusiasts who follow the tournaments take notice when Hite emerges from his quiet, secluded retreat. He's a world champion and methodical contender.

It was practicality that turned Hite—regretfully—away from the football career idea. He'd quarterbacked the Saluda High School team with great stats. "But at 5-foot-11, 165 pounds, I came to admit that wouldn't work out," he jokes. So he joined the Army National Guard immediately after high school graduation and served 10 years as a full-time guardsman.



*Article by Daniel E. Harmon*

Meanwhile, something ingrained in his upbringing began to make a resurgence. As a child, he'd learned to fish for bream, crappie, and large- and small-mouth bass on Lake Murray. "I just loved to fish. I also loved competition. That's what attracted me to tournament fishing." His first fishing tournament, at age 12, was a "wildcat" affair on Lake Murray entailing a simple \$20 entry fee for all comers. "I didn't do too well. In my second tournament, though, I finished in third place and won \$80. For a kid in the 1970s, that was a lot of money."

In retrospect, he figures the earnings weren't the main lesson. "Starting young was a big advantage



*2009 Bassmasters Classic in Shreveport, Louisiana*

for me—learning to deal with the pressure, adverse weather, different types of fish."

Only fishers are seen on lakes at dawn. They glide their craft quietly and cast constantly, stalking. Pleasure anglers are back home enjoying coffee by 9. For professionals, the day is still young at that hour. Their challenge—to find the fish—is an intense study that absorbs them until dusk. Each competitor is confined alone on a boat perhaps 20 feet long, devoid of shelter from sun, rain or hail. Fishing, for them, is *not* the life of Riley.

Example: Here's Davy Hite testing the depths on an Arkansas lake that few South Carolinians ever have heard of. Weather forecast: winds 15-25 mph, thunderstorms, possible hail. Doesn't matter to him or his rivals. Come the proverbial hell or high water, they'll be out there 10-14 hours. They aren't competing; this is a *practice* day.

In June he fished back-to-back tournaments. He drove 10 hours one Saturday from Ninety Six to Kentucky Lake on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. He was in his boat at daylight Sunday for the first of three practice days. Practice days are when the competitors learn where the fish are. It's a grueling drill. "You need to be on the water at 5:30 a.m. On those practice days, I fished until 6:30 or 7:30 p.m. in 95 degrees—never under a shade tree. You're ready for bed when you get to your motel.

"Then the [three-day] tournament starts. Official take-off is at 6 a.m.; weigh-in is at 4 p.m. The work days are shorter, but the intensity and pressure increase. We eat very little during a tournament."

At Kentucky Lake, he finished 13th out of 100 entrants—just missing the leaders' cut; the top 12 fishers after three days compete in a fourth-day climax. The next day he drove nine hours to Fort Madison, Iowa, for a tournament in which he finished 58th.

Hite was disappointed but not unrewarded. Fiftieth place in a typical tournament earns \$9,500; the winner draws \$100,000. He left Iowa early the following morning and drove 1,100 miles, 17 hours straight through, arriving home late at night, exhausted.

“Pulling a bass boat across the country is not a fun task, I’m telling you. It’s hard work. But it’s a good living. I’m not whining about the long hours.”

For professionals, fishing literally is a business. There are expectations and contracts, and much of the work is performed nowhere near water. Hite commits to 8-10 weeks a year working for sponsors—traveling to marine dealers’ open houses in distant states, making television appearances. “In our sport, it takes sponsorship to be able to travel all over the country and be competitive. I’ve always tried to associate with sponsors I can relate to, companies and people with mutual interests. Advance Land and Timber [a Lexington-based land and timber sales company] is a perfect match for me because they do what I love.”

An early major victory was the FLW Championship in Moline, Illinois, in 1998. (Forrest L. Wood, the tournament namesake, was the founder of Ranger Boats.) Hite used part of his \$250,000 prize to buy a 90-acre woodland tract near Lake Greenwood. Since then, he’s expanded it. He wanted space where he could take his sons Parker and Peyton fishing and hunting. With expert consulting, Hite developed two bass and bream ponds that feature intriguing bottom contours. A dedicated conservationist, he has planted most of the land in loblolly pines.

Meanwhile, he fishes as many as 12 tournaments a year in the coast-to-coast Bassmaster Elite Series sponsored by the BASS (Bass Anglers Sportsman



Society) Federation. He’s been on the BASS tournament trail for 15 years and has done better than most. According to ESPN statistics, Hite currently ranks 34th among more than 1,600 bass pros, has earned about \$1.5 million and has weighed in more than two-and-a-half tons of fish in his almost 200 tournaments. He’s won eight tournaments and

finished among the top 10 qualifiers in 30 others. So far this year, Hite has placed as high as 13th and weighed in as much as 67 pounds in a single event. Ask any fisher: That accounts for a lot of big bass in three days.

He relishes his time home. “The first five years I did this full-time, I was like a kid living a dream. The next five years, the motels started smelling the same and the fast food started tasting the same.”

How long will he compete? “Physically, 60 is the typical age of retirement from competition.” But some anglers continue. One of his friends remains competitive at 69. “Professional fishing is a lot like other sports. The longer you do it, the wiser you become, but your physical capacity diminishes.”

Hite, who is in his 40s, expects to fish the rest of his life. “That’s the neat thing about fishing. From five years old to 95 years old, you can enjoy it.”

Hite rates his Bassmasters Classic victory in 1999 as “the biggest single accomplishment of my career. That’s the Super Bowl of professional fishing.” Some 25,000 fishing enthusiasts were there; ESPN and *USA Today* made him a celebrity. He’d placed second in the Classic in 1996 and has been among the Classic’s top 10 finishers three times since his championship.

More meaningful to him, though, were his Angler of the Year awards in 1997 and 2002. “To know at the end of the year that you were the best means more than winning a single tournament.”

The overriding reward continues from tournament to tournament. It’s the perpetual thrill of “competing against the best in the world.” ❖



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