

Remember previous winters and those long tedious hours you spent preparing stickbaits and jerkbaits for your next fishing trip, diligently wrapping thin lead wire around the shank of treble hooks, drilling then refilling small holes, or carefully gluing lead weights to hard plastic bodies to make your lures suspend in the coldwater column?

Recognizing what avid anglers were doing and responding to this specialized wintertime niche, manufacturers developed a wide range of suspending lures.

Initially, these factory lures generated plenty of strikes from suspended bass. But as is often the case with black bass species, fish can quickly become conditioned to what the masses are throwing. Or more to the point, a specialized fishing technique often warrants customized lures.

In other words, hard-core anglers still tinker with suspending lures, trying to refine actions and presentations for maximum results.

Elite Series pro Mark Menendez is one of the “old school” jerkbait specialists. The Kentucky pro still uses floating models, such as Strike King’s Wild Shiner, and he still carefully adds weight in precise locations to create a customized suspending lure.

“I want it to be either completely neutral in buoyancy or a slight rise,” Menendez said of his customized lures. “I don’t want it to fall.”

And because lure buoyancy changes with water temperature, Menendez recommends a model that exhibits neutral buoyancy in 40- to 45-degree water, and a different model that rises slightly in water temperatures above 45 degrees.

If it’s beginning to sound complicated, keep on reading.

Like Menendez, fellow Elite Series pro Brian Snowden is a firm believer in closely monitoring water temperature during the winter months when the best pattern includes jerkbaits and suspended bass.

Snowden said that, in water temperatures between 39 and 45 degrees, he prefers shallow diving stickbaits with a slow fall. This subtle fall, he said, imitates dying shad.

Conversely, in water temperatures ranging from 45 to 50 degrees, Snowden switches to a jerkbait with neutral buoyancy. Once the water climbs above 50 degrees, he changes to a slow-rising model.

In other words, because of water temperature variances, not all “suspending” factory lures react the same in cold water, according to experts like Snowden and Menendez, who insist this is a critical ingredient in successful fishing when fish suspend in cold weather.

MENENDEZ MODIFICATIONS

Menendez always starts with a floating jerkbait. From there, he adjusts lure buoyancy based on water temperature by adding rubber core sinkers — 1/4-ounce for 5- to 6-inch models, and 1/8-ounce for smaller.

“I like to have weight hanging from the shank of that front hook,” he explained.

“That does two things for me. It gives me an unnatural presentation in the water that mimics a dying gizzard shad that time of the year. Secondly, if I barely tap that lure, the lead on the front hook adds a little bit of subtle action that I have found to be really important.”

Menendez tests the buoyancy of each lure by filling his kitchen sink with cold tap water and dropping the lure into the water to see how it reacts. From there he fine-tunes each lure by adding Storm’s SuspenDots or SuspenStrips behind the bait’s bill. Once a lure achieves the desired buoyancy, Menendez secures the weighted tape in place with a super adhesive.

The front-loaded lure gives Menendez an action that can’t be duplicated by a standard factory suspender.

“I can’t get any suspending bait to set in that kind of a 45-degree, head-

down position straight out of the box,” he said.

“When a gizzard shad is dying, that is the position he swims in. That head-down position is an unnatural thing that bass don’t see a lot. But when they see that presentation, they know it’s an easy meal.”

SNOWDEN MODIFICATIONS

Manufactured suspending lures are Snowden’s choices for coldwater presentations. But that doesn’t mean they are ready right out of the box.

Like Menendez, Snowden fine-tunes lures to improve their action and buoyancy, and he also prefers a slight nose-down resting position. To achieve it, he adds one SuspenStrip in front of the forward hook hanger and another strip behind it. Then he stacks SuspenDots on top of the front strip if he needs more weight.

Both pros mention the importance of matching the right line to this specialized application. For Snowden, that means 10-pound-test fluorocarbon because it sinks, allowing him to keep the lure in the strike zone longer. On lakes containing submerged aquatic vegetation, he chooses a slightly heavier 12-pound-test fluorocarbon.

In contrast, Menendez favors 8-pound-test monofilament for most situations.

“The bait has better action and is more lifelike. And with the lighter line, I can get it deeper,” he said.

In a situation where bass are suspended in cold water, it’s a game of inches. Thus, Menendez says he will drop down from 10- to 8-pound line, which gives him an extra 6 to 10 inches in presentation depth.

Menendez has experimented with fluorocarbon, but he believes its low-stretch characteristics cause lures to move too much with each subtle twitch of the rod

Suspending jerkbaits, such as the Lucky Craft Pointer 128 and the Smithwick Rogue, are solid picks for cold weather. Pros often customize them by adding extra weight.

Photo by Laurie Tisdale

tip. “So with monofilament, there is that little bit of stretch involved that allows me not to pull that bait farther and farther away from the strike zone.”

JERKBAIT THEORY

The wide array of sizes and styles of the suspending lures has made it more difficult for the average angler to choose perfectly matched models for suspended bass in cold water. But the two pros did offer some basic guidelines.

Menendez looks at geography. “It has to do more with what lake I am on. If it’s a big fish lake like Amistad, I try to use one that a shark would attack.”

His general rule of thumb is to select larger models (5 or 6 inches) when fishing anywhere south of the Ohio River. He opts for smaller stickbaits for waters north of the Ohio.

The average size of an individual fishery’s dominant forage species determines the length of Snowden’s jerkbaits. “More than likely, if I see little shad such as threadfin dying, then I use the standard-size Smithwick Rogue [4 1/2 inches]. But if I see big gizzard shad, I use a Lucky Craft Pointer 128 or the 5 1/2-inch Rogue or the 5-inch Bass Pro Shops XPS Pro Series Minnow.”

Interestingly, Snowden uses both shallow and deep diving models.

He adds SuspenStrips to a deep diving Pointer 100DD when he wants his lure to reach depths of 15 feet in the clear waters of Amistad or on his home lake of Table Rock, for example, where the standing timber tops out at 20 feet.

“It seems like the deep diver with the long bill works better when the water is really cold and the fish are still in more of a wintertime holding location than in prespawn,” said Snowden. “If I am graphing a lot of shad in 5 to 10 feet, then I use the shallower diving model.”

If bass on your home waters have seen a lot of suspending lures, try fine-tuning your jerkbaits to make them look and act more like a real meal for those finicky fish.

