

Bemidji Bassmaster – National Spotlight



It was a perfect fit.

Not just with Thor Swanson and Bemidji State University. But, too, with Swanson – and others like him – and a premier college fishing tournament that, for several days, shined a light on a fishery on the shores of BSU and this next generation of resource stewards.

The Carhartt Bassmaster College National Championship presented by Bass Pro Shops was contested in August of 2017 on Lake Bemidji and its intertwining waterways that include the Mississippi River. The Lake Bemidji “chain” isn’t necessarily known for its bass fishing, but it surprised many with the number – and size – of bass it yielded.

“It wasn’t a traditional venue for them,” said Mike Mulry, director of engagement marketing at BSU, who helped bring the tournament to BSU, along with the city of Bemidji and Visit Bemidji. “But ... after the tournament, we followed up with the tournament director and he said it was the best national championship they ever had. And he attributed that to the venue.”

Yes, the resource has a lot to do with the success of these tournaments and the series as a whole. But so, too, do the participants – these future ambassadors of our natural resources.



“We try to drive that home and educate them starting with the junior level,” Hank Weldon, director of that 2017 national tourney and manager of youth platforms at Bassmaster, told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates passionate Minnesota pastimes like fishing, embracing the resources that make these

Minnesota traditions great. (For more, go to www.minnesotatraditions.com.)

“We teach conservation and the environment so they can conserve the resource. That’s one of the main initiatives. They’re doing a great job.”

Weldon recalled one college angler from Louisiana talking about a tournament he fished near the Mississippi River in Louisiana a week or two before the national tourney, and how he soon would be competing for a national championship on and around the Mississippi, but some 2,000 miles away.



“They realize what it means as a resource,” Weldon said.

And that respect for those aquatic resources resonates throughout the college angling ranks.

“One of the things that struck me is, I asked (some of the competitors at the national tourney), with the no-wake zone, did they ever get tempted to go a little faster – because it is a race to get to the good fishing spots,” Mulry said. “They said, ‘No, it’s a no-wake zone.’ That’s the quality and caliber of these kids. They’re true sportsmen.



“The kids on the (fishing) team are the kinds of kids we want to attract to BSU – those who have a love of the outdoors, and fishing is a part of their lifestyle.”

The fishing team is what drew Swanson from his hometown of Blaine to Bemidji and BSU. He and his brother Mitch teamed to finish ninth out of 86 teams in that 2017 national tourney, where a profound respect for the resource was again on display across the board.

“When I go south, we don’t have to pull our plugs and you can go around with water in your live well,” Thor Swanson said of the common practice of “Clean, Drain, Dispose” in Minnesota to help combat aquatic invasive species. “When the southern boys came up they knew they had to pull their plugs. But they were all really good about it. In all those lakes down South, you should see all the Asian carp. The lakes are infested with all sorts of things.

“When we go down south, even if we don’t have to pull the plugs, we do.”

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