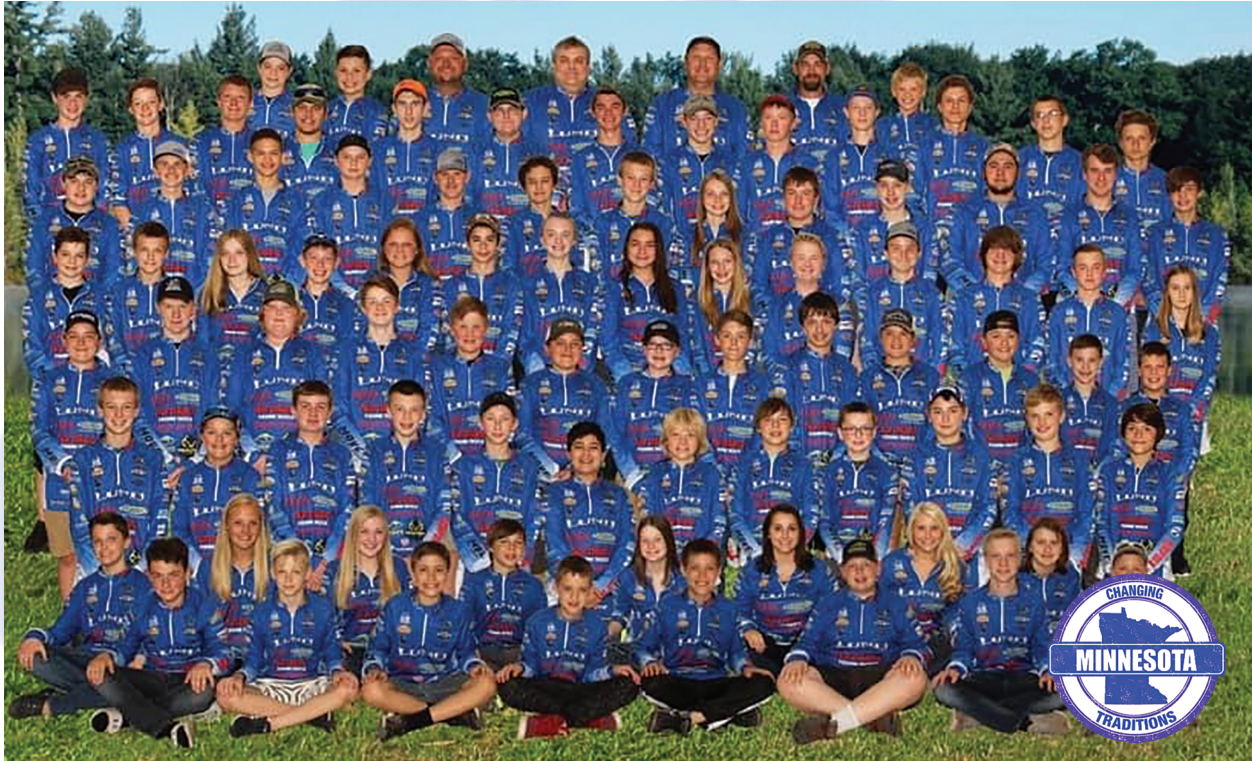


Competitive High School Fishing: The Latest Minnesota Tradition

Casting a line from a boat, dock or shoreline in hopes of feeling that electrifying tug from a hungry fish is certainly one of the oldest and most revered of all Minnesota Traditions; one that well over a million state residents participate in each year. Over the past few years, however, a group of young anglers, some 5,000-plus strong in Minnesota, have been carving their own niche into this time-honored pastime.



Organized in 2018, the Brainerd Warriors Fishing Team is among the largest in Minnesota.

The Student Angler Tournament Trail (SATT) is a non-profit organization established in 2018 that's dedicated to promoting fishing opportunities and environmental awareness among students and schools through competition, education and mentoring. Jason Bahr, an insurance agent in Brainerd, Minn., and diehard angler, was one of the driving forces behind the effort to establish competitive bass fishing as an activity for and high- and middle-school students.

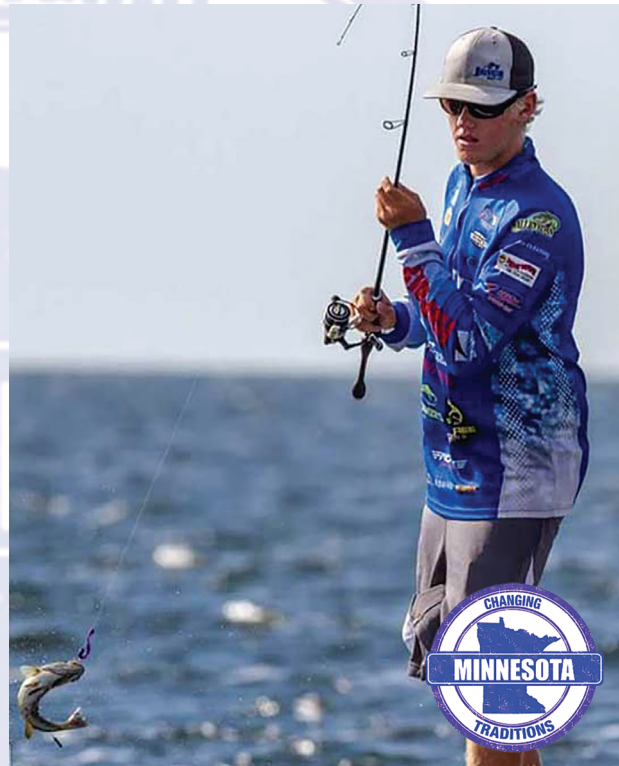
It's seed sprouted in 2015 when an interest in high school fishing was growing nationwide. Bahr and friend, Dan "Walleyedan" Eigen, asked the Brainerd High School administration to consider sponsoring a

competitive fishing team. “They very quickly agreed that it was a good idea,” said Bahr, now coach of the Brainerd Warriors Fishing Team, “so we started organizing and recruiting a team.”

Bahr hoped to get at least 25 students to join, he says, but the ranks rapidly swelled to 80. Today, about 130 young anglers ranging from 10 to 18 years of age fish on the Warriors team. And like students who participate in field sports, gymnastics, music or other activities in Brainerd, fishing team members must maintain an academic standard, and are eligible to earn a school letter.



A member of the Minnetonka High School Fishing Team with a dandy largemouth.



Former Minnesota State Fishing Champion, Kyle Bahr, took his interest in fishing to a higher level when he and his brother Tyler started their own fishing tackle business, Juice Bait Co.

In the beginning, Brainerd student anglers, and those in other school districts, mainly competed among themselves, fishing in two-person teams accompanied by an adult “Team Captain/boat operator.” Some of those anglers also fished in an annual state tournament, with those who excelled becoming eligible to go on to a regional competition.

“We took 14 kids from Brainerd to the regional tournament in Ohio that first year,” said Bahr, “with the hope that some of them would qualify for the national championship in Alabama.”

Though none did, the experience sparked a desire to create something bigger back at home. “We started talking about building a system where the kids could fish competitively and win some excellent prizes without having to travel so far,” Bahr explained.



An adult Boat Captain, typically a family member or friend, accompanies each two-person team on the water. The captain operates the boat, while the anglers make all the fishing decisions.

From that was born the SATT. A member of the national Student Angler Federation, the SATT held six tournaments, plus a Tournament of Champions, in 2019. This year, the schedule includes regular SATT events, as well as virtual tournaments. Regular events are possible because normal tournament rules (no common take-off and no live weigh-in) allow for social distancing.

Each team launches at any public access it chooses on the tournament lake, so there is no crowd at a common “take-off” location. Likewise, all bass caught are recorded and released on the spot. A photo as well as the fish’s weight and length are uploaded via a specialized phone app to a judge who qualifies the catch. Competitors don’t begin fishing until the app is turned on by the Tournament Director at the designated start time.

At a recent tournament on Mille Lacs, 200 teams (400 student anglers and 200 boat captains), representing 52 Minnesota schools, competed for trophies and a share of the scholarship money that goes to the top finishers. They also hoped to get a good start on qualifying for The Bass Federation National High School Bass Championship.

“By the end of the year I think we’ll have about 75 schools represented in the SATT,” said Jimmy Bell, noted tournament angler, fishing promoter and SATT vice president & COO.



Pequot Lakes High School Fishing Team

In the SATT’s virtual tournaments, competitors are allowed to fish any local body of water they choose—with an adult captain—from a boat, kayak, canoe or shoreline. They follow the same tournament rules and safety regulations, and can upload details on up to seven large- or smallmouth bass using the phone app.

“We just completed our first statewide virtual tournament,” said Bell, “with more than 250 teams competing.”

Of the thousands of Minnesota youth involved in the program, roughly 20 percent choose to actually compete on the tournament trail, according to Bell. The majority of students take part to enjoy the “club experience” and to learn more about fishing, the environment and nature in general. So an added benefit of virtual tournaments is that they provide students

an opportunity to compete, if they choose, on their own terms and on familiar waters.



Membership in the SATT takes students beyond the front deck of a bass boat. They also learn how to protect Minnesota waters from the spread of aquatic invasive species.

“An important overall benefit of the SATT,” adds Bahr, “is that it keeps kids engaged in their school. When we started out, about 40 percent of the kids who joined the team weren’t part of an athletic team, or in the band, or were a member of a chess, drama or debate team. They just liked to hunt and fish, and didn’t have a school-related activity. Now you can walk down the hall and see banners for the fishing team, and their trophies in the trophy case. I think it really strengthens their connection to their fellow students and the school as a whole.”

Equally important is that it encourages the younger generation to carry on a valued Minnesota Tradition.

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