

Putting On a Show

Anytime you come to one of these big tournaments like the Classic or the E-50s, you have a lot of credibility with the fans, and that's what it's really all about, the fans.

—TWENTY-FIVE-TIME BASSMASTER
CLASSIC QUALIFIER ROLAND MARTIN

Saturday, May 21, 2005

5:12 P.M.

A small crowd has gathered along the shoreline near the launching ramp at Lake Dardanelle State Park in Russellville, Arkansas. Mostly men in their thirties and forties, some with preteen children in tow, they are facing the water to watch bass pro Mike Iaconelli. This sometimes hyperexpressive thirty-two-year-old is fishing generally perpendicular to the bank, moving his fire-red Berkley logo-decorated bass boat to his right in a northerly direction toward the near-empty fishing pier.

It is the final day of the BASS Lake Dardanelle Elite 50 bass tournament, the second of four such events that will lead to qualifying ten anglers to participate in the 2005 and 2006 Citgo Bassmaster Classics. Six pros out of a starting field of fifty have made the final Dardanelle cut. Iaconelli was in last place when the day began seven hours earlier at this very spot, after the anglers mingled with well-wishers, stood at attention for a live rendition of the National Anthem, and blasted away in their boats beneath the helicopter carrying ESPN cameramen.

Now, there's a cameraman on shore and another in a boat a few feet behind Iaconelli, plus four boatloads of fans behind them in the cove, creeping along and watching, not a fishing rod in sight. Dozens of observers leapfrog along the bank to keep pace with the pro as he fishes, being careful to sidestep goose droppings in the grass.

Watching where you walk may not be as much of a problem in the future. The well-endowed Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism, which gets \$25 million a year from its share of a one-eighth of 1 percent state sales tax, is planning a major construction project right where these fans are walking. It includes building a boat dock near the launching ramp and its adjacent, nationally renowned \$600,000 tournament weigh-in pavilion, which will be used by fifty-two bass tournaments this year, and constructing a boardwalk along the entire shore to connect the pavilion to the fishing pier. Plans also include the use of an Elmo visual presentation machine, an overhead projector on a cart that can be rolled down the boardwalk to show events and instruction live to children in classrooms.



Bassheads on the water and along the pier watch Mike Iaconelli fish in the closing minutes of the 2005 BASS Elite 50 tournament on Lake Dardanelle in Arkansas. An ESPN cameraman in the far right boat records every moment.



Davy Hite, the winner of the Lake Dardanelle tournament and a past Bassmaster Classic champion, signs autographs prior to fishing on the last day of the 2005 Dardanelle event.

“This tournament was won right here last year,” says Angie Thompson, a producer for JM Associates, which produces BASS tournaments for ESPN. She’s referring to the Elite 50 event that was held in April 2004 on this lake. “Randy Howell was fishing along the rock wall. It’s a great spot. Randy’s wife and son were here and watched him win it. It was neat.”

The bulk of the fans move toward the pier, which Iaconelli has now reached, and I head there, too. Essentially an extended wood dock erected by the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission, the pier’s floorboards and railings are about to get a gross body weight stress test.

Several dozen onlookers and a pair of TV cameramen quickly line the pier. They are remarkably quiet and respectful, much like fans around the green at professional golf tournaments, even to the point of

whispering. Most are intently watching Iaconelli, who appears not to have noticed the unusual grouping. Surely he has, but his demeanor doesn't show it, and so far he hasn't acknowledged the crowd.

To many anglers, this public scrutiny would be unsettling; to others, it could be invigorating. This is the first time that I have ever seen Iaconelli. His black-and-red flame-emblazoned shirt, which screams for attention, seems to indicate that he is probably invigorated.

Maybe the effect on one's state of mind depends on whether there's a good weight of bass in the livewell. If there *is* a good weight, then practically rubbing elbows with the fans while competing could be fun. If there isn't, and with the end of the day just an hour away, the pressure to show the crowd something could be mentally torturous.

5:23 P.M.

Iaconelli's boat is barely forty feet from the pier. His assigned camera boat stays behind and slightly ahead of him, shooting both the angler and the growing crowd on the pier. I move to the end of the pier where a young couple and their daughter are stationed. They carry two folding chairs in sacks to set up later on the lawn in front of the weigh-in stage. The father, in his early thirties, wears a white T-shirt that says Citgo and bears an image collage of the petroleum company's sponsored pros. The woman, thirtyish, wears a green sleeveless top devoid of names or logos, but her daughter, who looks about eight or nine and has a white bow in the back of her hair, wears a white T-shirt with the words *Triton*, *Mercury*, and *Citgo* on the back. It also sports the black-ink signatures of numerous bass pros.

Iaconelli, or Ike, as a statement on the back of his walking-billboard shirt reads, is headed toward the end of the pier. The front right panel of said shirt indicates that he is sponsored by, among others, Dick's Sporting Goods, for whom he was once a store employee in his home state of New Jersey. There is some irony in this, as the nearest Dick's is 254 miles away in Frisco, Texas, while Wal-Mart, which is the leading sponsor of the *other* major bass tournament series, the FLW Tour, has Supercenter stores in Russellville and Dardanelle. And, of course, the headquarters of this retail giant, which probably sells the lion's share of all fishing gear purchased in

the United States each year and which opened its first store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, is just 140 road miles to the northwest.

Using spinning tackle, Iaconelli pitches a small worm to the edge of the pier beneath my feet. This is right about the same time that Afleet Alex is rounding the final turn at Pimlico Racetrack in Baltimore. The thoroughbred stumbles on the heels of the swerving front-runner Snappy T, then catches its step and whips the rest of the 2005 Preakness field, including the Kentucky Derby winner Giacomo, before a disbelieving crowd of 115,380 people. Later news accounts use the words *dramatic*, *amazing*, *miraculous*, and *courageous* to describe the athletic recovery of the \$650,000 prize-winning horse and jockey in what instantly became one of thoroughbred racing's most memorable big-race moments.

But none of the race fans at Pimlico, a private track owned by Magna Entertainment Company, are physically on top of the scene like the bass fishing fans are here at Lake Dardanelle State Park, a state-owned facility on a publicly accessible U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lake. Nearly all of these people are from Arkansas, which has an active racing interest and whose main annual event, the Arkansas Derby, was won earlier in the season by Afleet Alex, yet no one here seems to have a radio tuned to the race.

I look around to observe the people on the pier when Iaconelli hooks a fish.

"He's got one," says someone excitedly.

The crowd murmurs.

Iaconelli's spinning rod is bowed, and he points it quickly from one side to the other. Then he makes a nimble side-to-side shuffle with his feet as if he were jumping over a snake. Actually, he's unsure which way to steer this bass—away from the propeller of the bow-mounted electric motor or away from the propeller of the transom-mounted outboard motor. He sprints to the back deck.

"Giant! Giant!" he shouts, alerting the camera crew. As if they weren't already poised on his every move.

The crowd buzz has intensified, and some people near the shore hustle toward the outer end of the pier for a closer look.

The fish moves to Iaconelli's right, and he races to the bow deck. The camera boat has drifted closer to him.

“Camera boat!” Iaconelli yells. “Camera boat!”

The camera boat operator, sitting in the bow seat with his foot on the electric motor, swings away. Moments later, with rail watchers and ESPN’s pier cameramen focusing on Iaconelli, he falls down on the front deck on his right hip, leans over the boat with the rod extended in his left hand behind him, and scoops the fish up in his right hand. The crowd cheers with approval, then gives him an ovation.

As if he was Phil Mickelson and had just made a difficult clutch putt.

As if he was Terrell Owens and had just hauled in a pass in the end zone.

Iaconelli stands up and shows the fish to the crowd, the first time that he’s acknowledged their presence. Or maybe it’s for the TV cameras on the pier.

Then he turns toward the camera boat and lifts the greenish-black bass high, shaking it. His back arches slightly. “Yeaaaaaaaah!” he screams, pumping his fist.

The crowd laughs. “Going Ike” is what fellow pros call this now-trademark yell.

“Way to go!” someone shouts.

A likely 3-pounder, it’s no giant and, as it turns out, not even the largest bass caught by the finalists today. But it’s enough for Iaconelli to reach into his livewell and pull out a fish that looks about 2 pounds. He’s working fast now. Checking the fish. Balancing them on a culling scale. Unceremoniously dumping the smaller one into the water like it was a rock. Changing tags that identify the fish in the well. Getting ready to make another cast.

The pier is abuzz over the catch and the catcher’s antics, as well as with the realization that Iaconelli has a limit of five fish, the smallest of which must be at least 2 pounds. Until this moment, the crowd hasn’t known how well he’s done for the day, but now it’s clear. He has at least 12 pounds of bass, probably close to 15, and could—if leader Davy Hite runs out of steam on the backstretch—be in a position to win the \$100,000 first-place prize.

Hands-free, Iaconelli stands up on the bow deck, and, with about sixty sets of eyeballs on him, loads of handheld digital cameras being

focused, and three TV cameras rolling, he realizes that the show is not quite complete. He quickly squats and does a once-around break-dancing leg sweep—another trademark. The crowd laughs. Some people applaud. They'll see it again later on the Jumbotron and the following Saturday on *BassCenter*, but this is live in-their-faces entertainment. Which is virtually unheard of in fishing, a sport not known for being spectator-friendly.

Fans get to watch the bass pros on television and hear them at seminars, but almost never are they able to stand on shore forty feet from one while he works his magic *and* while he's playing for all of the chips on the table—with three ESPN cameras ready to show it to almost a hundred million households, a number touted later by an irrationally exuberant weigh-in emcee who neglects to mention that this is 99.6 million more than the number of people who will actually be watching.

It's not the first time that love-him-or-hate-him Iaconelli has screamed or break-danced, but usually that happens somewhere out on the lake beyond the gazing eyes of fans, where he's mainly performing for one camera and a chance to get more of that oh-so-valuable face and name time on the highlight reel.

Knowingly or not, these fans have just witnessed the future of professional bass fishing.

That future is spelled t-h-e-a-t-e-r. As in bass fishing entertainment, where players, action, drama, spectators, and cameras converge.

The folks on the pier and on the shore at Dardanella have the equivalent of a sideline pass in football, seats behind the dugout at a baseball game, a spot along the rope at the eighteenth hole green. And, best of all, they'll be in the highlight video. "Honey, look! That's me on the pier, by the post, next to the guy with the Yamaha hat."

Later at the weigh-in, in front of a crowd of several thousand people, Iaconelli will say that he wishes there were more places like this, more spots where crowds can gather to watch the action up close and personal.

Jerry McKinnis, a longtime television fishing celebrity and the head of the company producing the ESPN telecast of this event—which will air a week later—hurriedly walks down the pier and motions to the cameraman in the boat behind Iaconelli.

“You getting this?” he asks, making a circular motion with his hand toward the crowd.

The cameraman nods. I’m thinking, *Bet your ass he’s getting this. You’d have to be deaf, dumb, and blind to miss the magic here.*

Angie Thompson is now on the pier, too. She and McKinnis might have been watching a live camera feed in the mobile production truck. Or just heard the crowd erupt, like at a golf tournament when someone at a nearby hole has made a great shot or putt.

McKinnis walks past us. “This is great,” he says, smiling broadly. “This is a story all by itself.”

I know what else he’s thinking—the same thing that Iaconelli says later on stage. *Wish we could do this at every tournament.*

5:35 P.M.

Iaconelli catches another apparent 2-pound bass, much like the one he culled, and chucks it back without measuring it against others in his livewell. One of his competitors, Gary Klein, in a red-and-black Mercury-decorated boat, has come into the area and is fishing the other side of the pier, his own TV camera boat in tow. At 5:40, Iaconelli lands another 2-pounder and tosses it back, which tells Klein that his opponent has a decent limit. Each time the crowd applauds.

A forty-something fellow comes over next to me and points toward Klein. “Who’s that?” he asks. Then he asks who else is in the final field. I tick off the names.

“What about Mark Davis?”

“Nope.”

“Awwh,” he says. “He’s my hero.” Then he looks over at Iaconelli. “He must have some good ’uns if he’s throwin’ fish like that back. That’s two he’s tossed back better’n two pounds.”

Sitting a hundred yards in front of the pier is a boat with two fellows propping up a six-by-six banner that reads “Never Give Up,” a reference to words that Iaconelli shouted to the camera when he caught his final bass, a 3-plus-pounder, to win the 2003 Citgo Bassmaster Classic and \$200,000 by 1 pound 12 ounces over Klein. It’s a bass fan’s attempt to make the highlight reel, à la the football or baseball stadium.

The fans on the pier are just a sampling of the several thousand

who will soon gather to watch the weigh-in spectacle, but most of them are fans for sure. Almost all of them are wearing shorts or jeans and T-shirts that somehow express an affinity for fishing—it's the uniform of the rabid fishing enthusiast. Probably 80 percent of them have baseball-style caps on. The rest, like the few women in the crowd, have no cap at all.

Near me is a fellow whose T-shirt front says "Cabela's." The back of another's reads "Alltel Bass Fishing Classic." Another one says "Citgo Fishing." And another wears a T-shirt with a red, white, and blue bass on the front, the stars being placed on the head and the gill plate of the bass. Many of the shirts are stretched over what might politely be called love handles, and some stretch over what can only be called potbellies, contrasting with each of the trim and fit-looking bass pros here.

Aaron Martens, in the orange-and-blue Citgo sponsor boat and with camera boat following, has moved into the cove about sixty yards south of Iaconelli, and at 5:48 lands a smallish bass. Even though he's a good distance away, the crowd notices and applauds, which causes Iaconelli to briefly glance around. Martens puts the fish in his livewell without hesitation.

"He mustn't be doin' too good," surmises someone behind me, the inference being that since he did not cull, he must not have a limit, or he just got his limit-making fish, a none-too-big-one at that.

Another competitor, Dustin Wilks, in the red-and-green Bass Pro Shops sponsor boat, moves into the area with his camera boat following and fishes on the north side of the pier, away from the structure in open water. No spectators go to that side of the pier to watch. They're all on Iaconelli's side.

That makes four of the six competitors fishing within a hundred yards of one another in the waning moments. And four camera boats, each with a TV cameraman aboard, plus two more TV cameras on the pier.

At 5:50, Iaconelli catches another 2-pound bass, quickly unhooks it, and throws it back into the water, not bothering to lean over and give it a more gentle release. No time for niceties. While he straightens out the worm on his hook, he looks up at the crowd and yells, "Where's my caddy?"

The crowd laughs.

Iaconelli is referencing the similarity to a professional golf tournament, but I'm taking it literally, wondering what would a fishing caddy do? Hand him another rod? Check the line for nicks? Straighten the worm out? Put the fish back into the water with a little more care and respect?

"What a comedian," says an amused guy next to me, who is wearing a hat with autographs across the bill and the crown and a T-shirt that has the words "Nothing's perfect" arcing over the caricature of a leaping bass and the words "but fishing is as close as it gets" underneath it.

Behind me, a fellow asks the TV cameraman if he can say hello to his family, as if this were live. As if he were on the bench at a football game saying, "Hi, Mom," at the camera and wagging his index finger. The cameraman says this is being taped; that it would probably never get on the final program. The fellow shrugs. "Well," he says, "I'll just tell 'em to watch."

Then someone's cell phone rings musically, and I notice that many people on the pier are talking on their phones. A kid about ten feet away says to someone, "I'm standin' here . . . watching Iaconelli . . . Ike-un-elle. . . . Yeah, he caught a five-pounder."

5:59 P.M.

Aaron Martens creeps over toward the inside back of the pier, but Iaconelli, bow pointed toward shore, sees him out of the corner of his eye or out of eyes in the back of his head and, still casting intently into the pier, moves down and cuts off Martens's path. He picks up a bait-casting outfit tied to a jig. As Martens turns and heads back toward the middle of the cove, Iaconelli turns and heads back toward the head of the pier, much like a spawning bass protecting its bedroom now that the invader has been rebuffed.

Klein has left for the breakwall on the other side of the cove, and Wilks is out of sight, neither of them having caught a fish here.

Iaconelli looks over his shoulder to see where Martens is and gets in position to cast to the head of the pier, controlling his motor and boat in such an effortless manner that it acts like an extension of his body. Unlike the shirts of most of the other competitors, his heavily

patched and logoed shirt is not white or beige but red and black, with a midriff flame pattern, and he's wearing black high-top sneakers, which brought laughs from some people in the previous night's weigh-in crowd when they saw it on the Jumbotron.

There is what could be a smirk on his face, but it's probably just a quirky intense look that has evolved after peering so hard into the water for most of the last 459 minutes. Or, maybe it's his I'm-really-busting-my-ass-and-concentrating look for the cameras. It is, after all, showtime.

6:06 P.M.

The pier crowd is thinning. Gary Klein returns and again fishes the opposite side of the pier from Iaconelli, who slowly marches up and down the same sixty-foot area. After freeing his line from a snag, Iaconelli checks it for fraying and tosses his worm back out, landing it by a post under a young kid who's wearing a Citgo Bassmaster Tournament Trail T-shirt and a hat loaded with the signatures of professional anglers.

Klein has moved so close to the other side of the pier that anyone could jump onto the back deck of his boat. He kneels down so as to pitch under the pier. A tall, bald, burly man leans on the rail looking down at Klein, and when his son calls to him from the other side of the pier, the man turns his head and raises his right forefinger to his pursed lips. Behind him on shore, a whining generator powers McKinnis's mobile studio and video production truck, and in the parking lot, a Russellville fire truck sits with fully extended ladder flying a large American flag over the park's visitor center.

The center, which received more than two hundred thousand people in 2004, contains several aquariums holding a total of eight thousand gallons of water and many of the ninety-five fish species that exist in Dardanelle. Only one of these, the largemouth bass, is of interest to the people assembled outside and on the fishing pier. In fact, there are several 8-pound-or-better bass swimming in the visitor center's main circular aquarium, which is ironic because, oh, how such bass would be coveted right now by Iaconelli, Klein, Martens, and Wilks.

More people are now watching the equally intense and focused Klein, but at 6:18 he backs away and makes a few casts away from the

pier out in the open. Iaconelli does likewise, moving away from his side of the structure. A Bass Pro Shops' Sun Tracker pontoon boat with eight passengers pulls into the cove, weaving through assorted spectator and camera boats toward the shore. It will likely deposit its passengers for the weigh-in festivities an hour hence.

At 6:20, the competitors abruptly stop casting. They pull up to their respective camera boats and take off remote microphones, then idle toward the launching ramp where new, bright, matching-colored, sponsor-emblazoned trucks are lined up ahead of boat trailers in the water.

The pier crowd disperses, joining the nearby throng of several thousand that is packed in front of the weigh-in stage and the Jumbotron, where loudspeakers have just finished blaring Elton John's "Crocodile Rock," jumping right into the driving New Wave beat of Wang Chung's "Everybody Have Fun Tonight."

Shortly, Davy Hite will be crowned the victor, pocketing \$100,000, which pushes him over the \$1 million mark in career BASS earnings. Iaconelli finishes second, Martens third. Although there will be two more qualifying tournaments before the July Bassmaster Classic in Pittsburgh, these anglers have helped to secure their position in that event, which promises to be vastly different with respect to the nature of the tournament and the fishery, the amount of fans, and especially the attention of the media.

Despite being in the heartland of bass fishing and being a precursor of how major bass tournaments may be staged in the future, Dardanella has been a tune-up for the really big show.