

Lowrance Pro Team Championship Review

Lake Oahe has long been known as one of the premier walleye fisheries on the continent. This can be evidenced by its being a perennial host to many of the most prestigious Professional Walleye Tournaments. This years Lowrance Pro Team Championship is no exception.

I'll give you a brief history of Oahe since its inception, what shape it is in today and what can be expected when the contestants arrive to fish the Championship which is to be held September 8,9,10th at Spring Creek Resort on the lower end of Lake Oahe.

Oahe is one of six mainstem dams constructed on the upper basin of the Missouri River in an effort to control flooding and to provide hydroelectric power. Construction was completed in 1962 and at full pool encompasses 371,000 acres and stretches 231 miles across both Dakotas with literally thousands of shoreline miles.

Oahe has been through many cycles in its brief history and has demonstrated the ability to rebound from whatever man or mother nature can throw at it. Oahe is currently in the throes of historically low water levels. This is due to several years of minimal mountain snowpack in the headwaters region of the Missouri River in Montana and in my opinion, some extremely poor management and water use priority judgements by the US Army Corp of Engineers.

As a result of some of the Corps decisions, the reservoirs primary Walleye forage species, the protein rich Rainbow Smelt, populations have been drastically reduced from years past. While this hasn't significantly affected Walleye numbers, we have noticed a slimming of our formerly "football" shaped fish.

This being said and despite the low water levels the Walleyes are beginning a comeback regarding size and health. This is in large part due to their adaptability to feed on other available prey types. In addition to Smelt as a cold/deep water option, Lake Herring are present. The shallows contain good numbers of Emerald Shiners, White Bass, Drum and Perch that the Walleyes are taking advantage of. In an interesting note, Gizzard Shad were discovered throughout the reservoir in 2003 and were the most abundant bait fish found in that year. They should provide a viable food source in the short term and help to sustain the Walleye population until the Smelt fully recover.

The current daily bag limit has been reduced as the predator prey relationship has been coming more into balance as of late. Until recently, there were extremely large numbers of small fish that were literally eating themselves out of house and home. The limit now stands at six Walleye per day of which only one can be 20 inches or over and at most four over 15 inches with the remaining two under 15 inches, in this scenario. All six of your daily limit can be under 15 inches if you should so choose.

The Lowrance Pro Team Championship officials will be weighing in six fish per day with a 15 inch minimum and the allowable two fish over 20 inches in each basket. South Dakota is a no cull state, meaning that once a fish is put in the livewell it cannot be replaced in order to upgrade size. Another point that should be known is that South Dakota considers any fish touching either the upper or lower end of the slot to be considered over. Thus a fish that just touches the 20 inch mark will be considered to be over 20 inches and not allowed for your under 20 slot. Eight tags

will be issued each day, affording the competing anglers the opportunity tag six fish between 15 and 20 inches with two tags designated for the over 20 inchers. What this means to the competitors is that if they are fortunate enough to have their two over 20 and six between 15 and 20 they can pick their best 4 slot fish in addition to the over 20's to have weighed. This should give us a little "wiggle" room in making our decisions in regards to what we tag and place in the well during the course of the day.

The next question on many of your minds is what can reasonably be expected as far as the size of the fish during the Tournament. I feel that there will be a number of teams that will come in with their two over 20 each day and some solid slot fish to go with it. I owe this to several facts. One, the fish are there for those who put together good patterns and work them to their benefit. Two, some of the top fisherman in the Walleye World will be present and bring with them vast experience, knowledge and talent in the numerous techniques that work on this reservoir. In addition, with no boundaries placed on where fishing may occur, the Tournament is literally wide open. If the bite is poor in the area close to the launch site it may come down to those who have the confidence and courage to make a large run and capitalize on a better bite elsewhere.

Don't get me wrong, there is very good fishing to be found near the launch site and the Tournament could very easily be won within just a few miles of Spring Creek. There is such a vast array of location possibilities available that it is anybody's guess as to where the most success will be found. The number of points with great structure to check out between the Dam and the Cheyenne River arm is absolutely mind boggling. On any given day the right one could produce a big basket. Although some of the more famous flats are now out of the water there is still more than adequate stretches of large feeding flats to explore within close proximity. To add even more confusion, there are some open water options available for those who are comfortable with this underexploited alternative.

The Cheyenne River arm itself will most likely play a large role for many of the teams. This is a great area year round and any type of structure you would ever want can be found in this major river arm. There are a limited number of developed facilities close by and thus it receives a little less pressure, which could be a factor. The entire practice period could be spent just scratching the surface of what the Cheyenne has to offer.

For those who are more adventurous and not afraid to play the run game, the section above the Cheyenne will also hold a lot of potential. Good fish will most likely be found here and may be worth the extra gas and travel time to exploit. Of course, weather will play a key factor in just how accessible these fish will be on the actual Tournament days. Even though most of us are now running very stout boats in the 20 foot class, Oahe can dish out some very rough water that only the most hardcore will want to travel great distances in. This could be the X factor and it will be very interesting to see how many teams go for it and how they turn out.

The methods used during the Championship will be as varied as the Contestants themselves. I think that you will see some very respectable weights come in that will be taken from very shallow to very deep as there are distinct groups of fish that are not all doing the same thing at the same time. The fish on Oahe can be aggressive and will respond well to most any technique you can think of.

When one thinks of Oahe the first thing that comes to mind are Bottom Bouncers and Spinners. This is very effective and easily the most used presentation. It's a great tool while in search mode,

as you can cover a good deal of ground and various depth levels in an effort to contact fish.

Livebait rigging and jigging deep points will definitely play a role in the outcome and is something that cannot be overlooked. Those who are accomplished in this and possess good boat control skills will finish well. There are some outstanding local teams to look out for as far and will most likely excel riggin and jiggin.

As always, Plugs will have their place in the mix. There will be some teams that are adept in the nuances of cranking and will most likely put something together, possibly some of the largest fish of the Tournament. Hardbaits have a well earned reputation for bringing big fish to the boat. Whether it be shallow, deep, or somewhere in between, a few competitors will put a pattern together and make it into the final day pulling.

This will prove to be a very challenging (and rewarding to some) Championship event. Anything can and will work and at the very least will be quite a learning experience, as all Tournaments are. If any of the teams that fished the Qualifiers are sitting on the fence as to competing I would encourage them to throw their hats in the ring as just three good days of fishing could net them a large check and this years Lowrance Pro Team Championship honors. I would like to wish the best of luck to all of the Contestants.

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