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THE UMBRELLA RIG REAPPEARS

The reintroduction of the temporarily banned umbrella rig in New York B.A.S.S. Nation competition has created a bit of a stir in recent weeks. Whether you are *for* or *against* the use of this lure, you owe it to yourself to be properly informed and this is a good time and a good place to cover this territory. Let me get one thing out of the way from the beginning. Before you jump to any conclusions, let me state that I am completely neutral when it comes to the use of umbrella rigs in bass fishing competitions. It does not bother me either way if they are allowed or not.

There... Now haters can hate the rig and not the messenger.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Trolling with an umbrella rig (aka the A-Rig or Alabama rig) is nothing new to this sport. Salt water fishermen have been using “schooling bait fish” type lures for decades for bluefish, and striper fishermen have had them in their arsenal for many years, as well. But what was originally referred to as an umbrella rig, has evolved dramatically into

the bass catcher we are all aware of today. Traditional umbrella rigs were a heavy, made to get-down-deep apparatus that was usually trolled on a wire line. It was when inshore striper fishermen noticed that they also caught the occasional largemouth and smallmouth, that some lure makers decided to downscale the components and make the rig lighter and more user friendly for the recreational angler. The secret was let out of the bag after Paul Elias crushed the competition on Lake Guntersville in 2011 while using the “A-Rig.” The lure was later banned on the professional Bassmaster trails, because it skirts the issue of “single line, single lure” ethics.

IN OUR CASE, WHY WAS THE UMBRELLA RIG BANNED ORIGINALLY?

Pete Knight - NY B.A.S.S. Nation President

“Originally, the issue was B.A.S.S. mandated. For 2015, Jon Stewart, B.A.S.S. Nation Director, broke the news to the sitting Nation presidents that the qualifiers for the Regional Team must be from a

Pro-Am circuit, as well as the A-Rig will not be allowed in competition. He was basically misinformed. The B.A.S.S. mandate was that these rules were for the *national* level and not for the state level. But Jon never clarified that and the presidents went away assuming this went top to bottom. It was mistakenly said to be banned at all the levels, but was really only banned at the national level.”

WHAT WENT INTO THE DECISION TO ALLOW IT BACK IN COMPETITION?

Pete Knight - NY B.A.S.S. Nation President

“I found out that we could actually use the Alabama Rig at the state level through recent conversations with Jon (Stewart). When I found that out, I talked to the Executive Committee about what we should do. Should we sit on it for the year, because our rules state that it’s banned, or should we see if it’s something that people want? The committee decided that they wanted to use it. So we decided to get it out there and see what the clubs say. This happened right before the Ogdensburg tournament, so Dave Repman (tournament director) informed the anglers that it was allowed for that tournament and we would get feedback for the next tournaments. So then we gave the club presidents two weeks to reply with whether they wanted to use it or not, before we made a final decision. The club presidents that responded, overwhelmingly replied with a yes, with only a couple of clubs abstaining. There were only a few members who weren’t club presidents that complained, but we are satisfied that we made the right decision on the whole.”

IS IT CHEATING OR AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE TO USE AN UMBRELLA RIG?

Ethically, the simple answer to this would be no. Although it may be a bit unconventional, technically, it is just another tool in an angler’s toolbox to entice fish to bite. You still have to locate the fish and assume an umbrella rig is something that they are interested in eating. Isn’t that what we try to do with every other lure or technique? To me, that is not cheating. If you have the will and

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the skill, you should be allowed to use it. However, the more important thing to be aware of, is where you can legally use it and how many hooks are allowed. Right now it is banned in Tennessee and Minnesota and the number of hooks or arms allowed varies in some states, including Canada. ALWAYS be aware of local laws if you plan to tie one on.

PERSPECTIVE:

Casey Smith - 2015 B.A.S.S. Nation National Championship Qualifier

“I believe the talent will rise to the top whether the umbrella rig is allowed or not. Look at tournament results on a body of water like Oneida. Generally, the same guys are at the top of the standings whether it was an event that allowed the umbrella rig or didn’t allow the umbrella rig.”

DOES USING AN UMBRELLA RIG ENDANGER THE FISH MORE THAN A REGULAR LURE?

One of the strongest arguments for banning the umbrella rig in tournaments, is the potential for injuring fish with the multiple baits and hooks. The potential to foul hook a charging predator bass is always there, especially if you tend to sweep your rod after you feel the strike. The fear of conservationists and state officials is the potential to increase the mortality rate of game fish. But what needs to be pointed out, is that many

lures, like crankbaits, jerkbaits and topwater baits (that have existed for decades) have 2 and even 3 sets of treble hooks attached to them. That's 6 or 9 points of contact versus the 5 on a standard A-Rig. How many of you have belly hooked, tail hooked, eyeball hooked or chin hooked a bass on one of the above mentioned lures? I know I have.

HOW MANY IS TOO MANY?

The number of hooks or quantity of baits with hooks on an umbrella rig is one of the only things in which I am going to take a firm stance. Purely for regulatory purposes, I believe 5 baits with single hooks should be the maximum allowed for tournament competition. There are companies out there that have 10+ arms, with the potential for 10+ hooks, not to mention the added blades for flash. If we don't set a limit on what is fair in competition, then who is to say someone won't design one with 9, 13 or 15 hooks? There are probably some already out there. I see a 5 hook limit rule in competition the same way I see a 250 horsepower limit rule on bass boats: Level the playing field.

PERSPECTIVE:

Barb Elliott - New York Nation Conservation Director
"As a Conservation Director, I personally see nothing wrong with the use of an A-Rig. Besides the ability to catch more than one fish at a time (which many people already do on baits rigged with double or triple trebles), I see no conservation rationale for banning their use. I have personally fished them since they first surfaced in popularity after Paul Elias's win on Guntersville a few years back and the hits you get on those baits are really addicting! It's just plain fun to fish. Just as in any technique, it is NOT a given you will catch them when using it - it takes skill and refinement. Those that speak badly of it have probably never tried it."

WHY DO SO MANY BASS ANGLERS SCOFF AT ALLOWING THE UMBRELLA RIG?

The biggest reason and maybe the most obvious reason anglers reject the umbrella rig can be summed up in one word: *Work*. Using the umbrel-

la rig is work. It's awkward to throw, tangles easily if not cast properly and it can flat wear you out. It is also work to locate the proper areas to use the lure and to actually learn to fish it properly. Just like any lure, there is technique involved and some anglers just get impatient throwing a clunky lure and put it down a lot sooner than say, a tube or a dropshot. This eliminates those who are physically challenged (myself included, with a bad shoulder) and those who don't want to put the time in to graph the fish.

PERSPECTIVE:

Chris O'Brien - 2014 & 2015 AOY

"It's not a magic bait like everyone thinks. It has a time and place. You can't just throw it out there and catch fish. There is technique and thought that goes into throwing it. If we start banning techniques, where does it stop?"

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Whether you consider A-Rig fishing a sporting manner or not, it is not going away any time soon. The two big professional tours have banned it because they feel it is too close to the definition of trolling - which is definitely not allowed. But it seems tours on the lower end of the ladder, especially state run competitions, seem to be comfortable with it for now. From the information I have gathered and the notable anglers I have interviewed, I can come to one wholesale conclusion: The umbrella rig is less about being unethical than it is about being better, or more clever than the competition. After all, if you fish any level of tournaments, you have at least some competitive nature, and fierce competition breeds ingenuity. It's that ingenuity that has created bone jarring strikes and the ability to hook more than one fish on a single cast - which is precisely what so many bass anglers like about it. 