

JT Thompkins takes Bassmaster Opens EQ points title for big win; Eight others punch Elite Series ticket as season unfold

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — The goal for JT Thompkins entering the 2023 St. Croix Bassmaster Opens season was simply to qualify for the 2024 Bassmaster Elite Series. But as the season unfolded and an Elite Series berth became more and more likely, Thompkins shifted his focus solely to winning the Opens Elite Qualifiers Division Angler of the Year title.

“Honestly, about two tournaments ago, I completely forgot about the Elite race. It was no longer a thought in my mind,” he explained. “It switched to the AOY race. That is why I have been shooting for the win in the last couple of events.”



Nine new anglers have earned invitations to fish the 2024 Bassmaster Elite Series after competing in all nine St. Croix Bassmaster Opens tournaments as part of the new Elite Qualifiers Division. JT Thompkins (center) is shown here holding the winning trophy. (Photo by Andy Crawford/B.A.S.S.)

Capping off an incredible season with his seventh Top 25 finish of the season, Thompkins clinched the Angler of the Year title in the inaugural season of the Elite Qualifiers Division format by accumulating 1,659 points. Along with the \$10,000 cash prize, the Myrtle Beach, S.C., native will be heading to the Bassmaster Elite Series.

Union City, Tenn., pro John Garrett finished second, followed by Illinois’ Trey McKinney in third. Robert Gee, Tyler Williams, Wesley Gore, Logan Parks, Ben Milliken and Kyle Patrick all earned Elite Series berths as well. Elite Series pro Kenta Kimura finished fifth in the EQ standings. Since Kimura double-qualified for the 2024 Elite Series,

that allowed one additional angler to earn an Elite invitation. “This has been one of the most stacked Opens fields of all time,” Thompkins said. “I have always thought about when I did make it to the Elites, I wanted to win Rookie of the Year. Just knowing I have done it once, I’ve beaten all the incoming rookies this year, it gives me confidence I can do it again next year.”

Eight of the nine anglers moving on to the Elite Series are under

the age of 30, with Thompkins (21), Williams (21) and McKinney (18) being the three youngest of the group. While the 2022 Elite Series rookie class was heralded as one of the best ever, Thompkins believes this incoming group has a chance to be even better.

“When all us were standing there with our medallions, and me and John Garrett were in the front, that was when a lot of it set in,”

he said. “When you talk to all the guys who qualified, none of them are scared. Everyone is saying, ‘We are going to go over there and dominate.’ They are all talking about winning.”

With a 19-point lead over Garrett going into the final tournament, Thompkins was as stressed as he has been this season knowing he needed to keep the momentum going for one more event. “This week, I’ve been more stressed out than any other week

of the year. I had cold sores, I couldn’t sleep, but when I saw that trophy at registration on Wednesday, everything came into focus,” Thompkins said during the cancellation day Thursday. “I have been pretty stressed about it, but usually the more stress I put on myself, the better I do. The more (stressed I am, the more) confident I feel about going out and catching them.”

With a strong performance on Day 1, Thompkins felt another limit on Day 2 would seal the deal. On the final day, Thompkins hooked up with a 4-pounder on a jerkbait, but his first couple turns of the reel collected his microphone cable and, for a moment, Thompkins was worried that bass would come off.

“I leaned into it, and the way I fish, my reel will hit my pocket, and when it did, the mic got wrapped up in it and I couldn’t reel,” he said. “Then all of sudden, the fish jumped in the air with complete slack in the line, and after losing two or three big ones already, I thought I was going to lose that one too. But the way he was hooked, I’m not sure he ever would have gotten off. It worked out. That fish was super-important.”

2-pounder,” Thompkins said. “That put me up another pound and I knew for 100% that it was over. John would have needed a 30-pound bag to come back.”

The Angler of the Year title caps off an incredible year for Thompkins. Last September, he notched his first career victory at the Upper Chesapeake Bay, which led to a 24th-place finish at the 2023 Academy Sports + Outdoors Bassmaster Classic. Leaving Knoxville with a competitive finish gave Thompkins a ton of confidence heading into the bulk of the Opens season. “A lot of fishing is confidence,” said Thompkins. “When you get back in the boat each morning with the confidence that you are doing it a lot better than a lot of people, it gives you confidence to stick with it knowing that, if you do, you’ll come out on top. That is what has helped me a lot this year ... being able to stick to a deal more and longer than everyone else around me because I have the confidence I’ll be able to catch them. It has worked out this year perfectly.”

Thompkins spends close to 300 days on the water a year. Other than travel and boat maintenance days, Thompkins said he will be on the water from daylight to dark, scanning and searching for winning spots and techniques. Practice makes perfect, and that’s the philosophy Thompkins has adopted throughout his journey to the Elite Series.

Once that bass entered the live-well, Thompkins felt he had put it out of reach, but another cull late in the day provided the biggest sigh of relief. “I threw back a 1-pounder for a

Bass Fishing Hall of Fame inducts Glen Andrews, Bruce Holt, and Michael Iaconelli in banner night to honor elite legends

By The Fishing Wire

SPRINGFIELD, MO, Oct. 2, 2023 – It was a banner night for the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame. With more than 275 people gathered inside the White River Conference Center, including Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris, the Hall of Fame on September 28th enshrined three new members — **Glen Andrews, Bruce Holt and Michael Iaconelli.**

Through donations and industry support as well as the popular online auction that featured fishing trips and other outdoor experiences, pro angler memorabilia and a vast array of fishing tackle, the 2023 version of Celebrate Bass Fishing week raised more than \$200,000, exceeding all previous Celebrate Bass Fishing Week totals.

“The induction ceremony evening and the events and activities leading up to it really showed what the bass fishing world is all about,” said BFHOF Board President John Mazurkiewicz. “It didn’t matter whose tournament circuit you favor, whose boat you ride in or the brand of the tackle you use, we all were able to come together as one to support the Hall’s mission of celebrating, promoting, and preserving the sport of bass fishing.”

With 20 Hall of Famers in attendance, all distinguishable by their royal blue blazers, and with new banners hanging from the ceiling to commemorate each induction class, it was an evening to remember for many reasons.

On a night when the Hall’s inductee roster grew to 95 and the fishing industry gathered to collectively celebrate the sport and its icons, Morris revealed during his remarks to start the evening that work will begin later this fall on new additions and features at the Wonders of Wildlife facility that should enhance visitor traffic through the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame space.

“We will be rerouting the traffic so that everyone that comes through Wonders of Wildlife and the aquarium, it’ll be an option for everybody to go through the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame,” Morris said. “As folks exit the Hall, it’ll lead them to some new aquariums and really celebrate bass as a species of fish.”

Andrews, 93, was seated in a



“With 20 Hall of Famers in attendance, all distinguishable by their royal blue blazers, and with new banners hanging from the ceiling to commemorate each induction class, it was an evening to remember for many reasons,” makes for a perfect description to describe a historic night for fishermen who love the art of one of mankind’s oldest sport. (Photo/Courtesy: BFHOF)

wheelchair for much of the evening but he stood tall at the podium during his acceptance speech and displayed a sharp wit as he was celebrated for his pioneering efforts when tournament fishing was still in its infant stages in the 1960s.

“This has got to be one heck of a big extravaganza since it only comes around every 92 years,” Andrews said with a wry grin.

Andrews, from Lead Hill, Ark., is often referred to as the “best bass angler to have ever lived” by the likes of fellow Hall of Famers Bobby Murray and Bill Dance, both of whom counted Andrews as their mentor. He won multiple state bass fishing championships in the 1960s and was a key figure in developing rigging techniques such as the Andrews Slip Sinker Worm (now known as the Texas rig) and establishing the framework of rules that tournament anglers still abide by today.

“I’d give anything to stand up here and tell stories and swap lies with you for the next 30 minutes, but I can’t do that. I may not know as many good stories as Bill Dance, but some of mine are true,” Andrews quipped. “If

you’ll forgive me for that, Bill, I’ll say thank you for that 30 minutes you spent on a Zoom call a few months ago to tell me that I was going to be inducted in the Hall of Fame. I thank you and I thank each and every one of you for coming. God bless you.”

Holt, who passed away in 2021, was represented by dozens of family members, former colleagues and industry friends. Bruce’s younger brother, Ryan, accepted his plaque and told the crowd that his older brother would have been in awe of being inducted.

“Bruce would be humbled, thrilled and mostly surprised to receive this honor. He gave his life to fishing and all it represents, but he would never in his wildest dreams believe he’d have been inducted here with all the people he idolized and admired,” Ryan Holt said.

Holt spent more than 30 years with G. Loomis in various positions and played a central role in helping grow the profile of the G. Loomis rod brand, especially in the bass category.

Following Holt’s induction, it was announced that Shimano

(parent company of G. Loomis) will donate \$5,000 to the Hall of Fame in Holt’s memory with the funds to be earmarked for the Hall’s conservation grants, scholarship programs, and youth fishing initiatives.

Iaconelli, still an active compet-

itor on the Bassmaster Elite Series, concluded the evening by retracing the steps of what has been a transcendent career on and off the water.

“This is the most amazing feeling. I can’t even put it into words,” said Iaconelli, the only

angler to win the B.A.S.S. National championship, the Bassmaster Classic and the Bassmaster Angler of the Year award. “To look out at this sea of people who are my heroes from the fishing industry and not just the fishermen, but the writers, the retailers, my friends ... it really feels like my life has come full circle.”

The induction events were made possible by major financial support from B.A.S.S., Major League Fishing, Phoenix Boats, Wired2fish, PRADCO, Bass Pro Shops/Cabela’s, AFTCO, Daiwa, Rapala, Rather Outdoors, Shimano, Costa, St. Croix, Simms, and Sunline.

To watch the 2023 induction acceptance speeches, visit www.BassFishingHOF.com.

The Bass Fishing Hall of Fame is a nonprofit organization led by a volunteer board of directors and is dedicated to celebrating, promoting and preserving the sport of bass fishing. Since 2017, the Hall’s inductees and memorabilia representing the history of bass fishing is showcased in Johnny Morris’ Wonders of Wildlife Museum and Aquarium in Springfield, Missouri, where it has rapidly become a popular destination. The 2023 BFHOF Induction banquet will be held September 28, 2023 at Wonders of Wildlife.

For more information about the Hall, its mission, and to become a supporting member, visit www.BassFishingHOF.com.

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