

I'd like to congratulate my fishing buddy Jason King and his partner Jay Ray Watkins for their high finish in the SCB trout tournament held out of Bluff's Landing Marina on Friday, January 25th and Saturday the 26th. They placed third out of 43 teams, earning \$4,200 for their efforts.

During the event, Jason caught a bunch of big trout. He brought a couple to the scales, but was forced to release others in order to comply with the state law which allows each angler to retain only one trout over 25 inches per day. The tournament rules encouraged the fish to weighed alive, so they could be returned to the water after their trip to the scales. Like me, Jason releases all the big trout he catches when he's fishing for fun, including a 10 1/4 pound specimen he caught back in 2010.

While Jason recounted the events of the tournament to me over the phone, I began adding up the total weight he would have weighed, if the event had been held under the same format as the Troutmasters tournaments I fished in the past. We fished for three fish per angler, per day back then, with no restriction on their maximum size.

During the two days, Jason caught two 29-inchers, two 28s, a 27 and a 26. He'd have weighed about 21 pounds on day one, over 18 on day two. His hypothetical total of nearly 40 pounds on six trout would have shattered the old Troutmasters record by a significant margin. His catch was not clearly reflected in the results of the tournament, since the rules in this event called for two anglers to bring in three fish total per day, with each allowed to contribute one over 25 inches per day.

I'm not writing this to help Jason whine about what might have been. In fact, he has no idea I'm typing this at all. I was the one who pointed out to him that the event had actually failed to clearly represent the quality of his fishing effort. Though he certainly wanted to win and did everything he could to control the outcome, he was well-satisfied with the 3rd place finish. He beat a bunch of other hardcore trophy trout experts in the process. I get that, but I'm struck by how poorly the format reflected the truth.

I'm not implying anything negative about the performance of Jay Ray Watkins either. He fished well and contributed to the team's sack. Jason told me the younger Watkins taught him something about being patient when the bite gets tough. "He's a first-class expert," Jason said of Jay Ray.

Mostly, what I'm saying is that the formats used in trout tournaments today sometimes fail to clearly identify the efforts of the anglers. First off, trophy trout fishing is not a team sport. Having two-man "teams" is a bad idea. Creating the need to bring fish under 25 inches to the dock is a bad idea too. Anglers who happen to catch a 24 7/8" fish in events with such formats are gaining an advantage, one which doesn't prove what it pretends to prove.

If tournament organizers really want to find out who the best trout fishermen are, they could do so. First, they would eliminate the team format and measure the catch of each angler individually.

If they want to continue bringing fish to the dock to be weighed, they should make the events longer (BASS tournaments last 4 days), and have contestants bring just one fish to the scales per day.

Perhaps a better way would be to forget about bringing fish to the marina at all. In my

opinion, it's time for tournaments to move toward measuring the catch of the contestants through the use of digital imagery. Anglers could submit date and time-stamped pictures of their catch, either hanging from a certified, numbered scale, or next to a measuring stick. This way, the formats could allow one angler to enter multiple big fish. Doing so would have allowed Jason's performance to be documented.

I don't know whether another angler in the SCB event caught six trout of the same (or better) weight as did Jason over the two days, but I seriously doubt it. The list of people who could have done so is short, limited only to those who also finished at or near the top of the board.

I point all this out not only as a way of giving Jason credit for what he did, but also to toss in my two cents about what's lacking in trout tournaments today.

Fishing competitively does one important thing for the anglers in the events. It accelerates their learning curve. Measuring one's catch against other good anglers is the best way to determine the quality of one's effort on a given day. Over time, this measurement of effort against a standard helps one refine strategies and decisions, and usually encourages the incorporation of new methods.

All expert anglers borrow ideas and information from their peers. No great fishermen learns his craft in a vacuum. I've been fortunate to fish and share information with some of the top trophy trout experts in the state during my career as a tournament angler and guide--Jason, John Gill, Ari Schwartz, Jesse Arsola, Jay Wright, to name just a few.

These guys taught me much in the past; some continue to do so to this day. Jason is my best fishing buddy now. We talk frequently about what's happening out there, what we are seeing and doing and catching. I've learned plenty from him already, and I know I'll learn more in the years to come. I'm blessed to call him my friend. Congrats, Jason! Not so much for finishing third, but for what you caught and what might have been.