

The rising sun backlit Smith Mountain on a late April morning, but down on the lake it was less than a dozen degrees above freezing. A light mist was rising off the water. A hundred low-slung bass boats circled warily, steering clear of each other, candy-colored, tangerine-flake streamlined sharks, their 250-horsepower engines grumbling and rumbling, hungry for action. The air was sweet with the smell of 93-octane exhaust layered with a sharper, edgier scent—pure, 100-proof adrenaline. *Timetogotimetogotimetogo!* Minutes before 7 a.m., the Blue Ridge Brawl was in countdown mode.

### Bass is Back

ESPN's Bassmaster Elite Series returned to Smith Mountain Lake for its Blue Ridge Brawl bass tournament last April. It first held the event on the lake in June 2007, and one fine show led to another. The Blue Ridge Brawl is one of eight four-day tournaments in the Elite Series. They are held on waters ranging from the Battle of the Border down on Lake Armistead in Del Rio, Texas to the Champion's Choice on Oneida Lake in Syracuse, New York. Only the best of the best bass fishermen, the top 100 in the country, compete in the Elite Series.



Winner Kevin VanDam hoists part of his \$100,000 catch.

# Big Money Bass

in the Blue Ridge

by  
John Shtogren  
Photos courtesy of ESPN



Everyone chased Kevin VanDam, but he was not to be caught.



**Matt Herren hooks up with a largemouth back in a cove.**

**Fish are kept alive and well in the weigh-in line.  
(Photo by John Shtogren)**



Anyone unfamiliar with the Elites should discard any notion of some good old boy in bibs with a gimme cap and a chaw of Red Man. These are professional athletes who have personally invested nearly \$100,000 in their boats and gear. They have mastered the strategy and technique to excel at their sport just as have the likes of Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. On any weekend millions of viewers tune into

ESPN to watch with awe and admiration, and to learn new ways to improve their own angling skills. More than 40 ESPN staffers were on hand at the Blue Ridge Brawl to provide live coverage from dockside and from inside the leaders' boats.

During a four-day tournament, the field of anglers is trimmed from 100 to 50 after two days, and whittled down to 12 at the end of the third. Only the final dozen

anglers compete for the big money on the fourth day. At the end of each day there is an on-stage weigh-in with each angler allowed five fish. The highest total weights for five fish make the cut. The fish must be alive to count in the angler's tally, and a dead fish results in a severe penalty. All fish are immediately returned to the lake after each weigh-in, and less than a fraction of a percentage point is lost along the way.

There is plenty of drama at the weigh-in each day as each fisherman's catch is placed on the scales, but it is more than game-show hoopla. There's serious money, real money, involved in the Elite Series. Each contestant has to dig \$40,000 out of his own pocket for the eight entry fees, but the potential payout is big too, with eight \$100,000 first-place prizes and a shot at the \$500,000 postseason money. One seven-pound lunker bass pulled from the lake can mean new braces and a college tuition fund for an angler's kids, while too many missed strikes or busted knots could bring on the Repo Man.

### **An Elite Lake**

Smith Mountain Lake is a perfect setting for the Elite Series—plenty of fish, plenty of room to fish, stunning scenery. The lake is an impoundment, finished in 1966, fed by the Roanoke and Blackwater rivers in central Virginia. It stretches more than 40 miles southeast of the city of Roanoke with 500 miles of shoreline made up of numerous bays, fingers and coves. The largemouth bass are often found back in the clearwater coves, hanging out under the shoreside brush and fallen trees. Smallmouth bass prefer deeper waters in the main lake.

The shoreline is dotted with many luxury homes often used only seasonally or on fair-weather weekends. In front of each are boat lifts and elaborate boathouses filled with watercraft of all kinds from Jet Skis and sailboards to cigarette boats and sailboats ready for the Bay and beyond. A float plane may be pulled up on the lawn.



**Top-12 finalist Byron Velvik charges off to find big-money fish.**

At the end of the first day of fishing, one contestant was heard to say, “Y’all got some of the most beautiful homes I’ve ever seen on any lake, but y’all got too much money—nobody lives in them!” But he said that on a Thursday, and with a 90-degree weekend in the forecast that was about to change.

### **A Sight Fishing Tournament**

The Blue Ridge Brawl was all about sight fishing, a combination of hunting and fishing. In April the bass move up into the hundreds of coves to spawn. Anglers peering into the lake’s clear waters can spot the fish, usually lurking under shoreside brush or fallen trees. The angler uses a flipping stick, a rod with a strong backbone and soft tip, to pitch a lure up next to the targeted fish.

Sight fishing can be both exciting and frustrating. Just because you can see a tournament-winning female holding tight to her bed doesn’t mean she’ll bite.

Largemouth bass, unlike their more aggressive smallmouth cousins, are notorious for ignoring lures dangled before their noses. An angler may have a dozen rods strapped to his boat deck, each with lures of a different size, shape and color, and will try each one before he has to move on to find a more willing fish. When it comes to sight fishing, as Elite angler Byron Velvik noted, “Leaving them is the hardest thing.”

For the first two days of the tournament, sight fishing was productive. The water was clear, the waves were calm and the fish were willing enough so that almost all anglers took their five-fish limit to the weigh-in each day. The 50 anglers who took a two-day, 10-fish total of 23 pounds or more went on to fish on Saturday. But nature and man would conspire to make sight fishing, or any kind of fishing, far more difficult over the weekend.

On Saturday, the temperature shot up over the 90-degree mark, the warmest day of a cool and wet spring. The trees

responded by throwing off pollen so thick it painted the cars and trucks at the landing in pea green and laid down a putting-green carpet in every cove. “The little breeze that came up yesterday kicked the pollen down into a lot of the best fishing water,” said angler Velvik. As difficult as it was to fish the quiet coves, the open lake was even more so.

Weekend sailors responded to the first warm weather of the season by coming out in droves and hitting the lake with a flotilla worthy of Dunkirk. Smith Mountain Lake changed for the anglers from being hospitable to being formidable. The wave action in congested areas was so great that one angler commented about flotation cushions required for safety, “With all the boat traffic on this lake, you need a cushion around your neck and another around your ankles!” Some anglers all but gave up—“I just couldn’t fish with all that traffic.” But one very notable angler took it all in stride.



Bass boats at dawn, almost time to go (Photo by John Shtogren)

### The Pro's Pro

Since the second day of the Blue Ridge Brawl, Kevin VanDam, or KVD as he is known, had been the leader of the pack. The 41-year old Michigan native somehow was able to overcome the obstacles faced by all the Elite anglers—reluctant fish, murky waters, boat traffic. He went out on the final morning with a two-pound lead over his closest contender and kept his lead to win at the tournament final weigh-in. No doubt his gear contributed to his success—Quantum rods and reels, Strike King lures and Oakley sunglasses. But 99 other anglers were equipped just as well. Fact is, KVD didn't out-fish the others, he out-thought them.

KVD's winning strategy was almost Zen-like in its go-with-the-flow approach to tournament conditions. His strategy reflected the kind of harmony sought by the Zen masters rather than the usual Western confrontational in-your-face stance. Instead of sight fishing for large-mouths in the protected coves and contending with the pollen, he worked the more open areas of the lake. Instead of avoiding the

wave action from the many pleasure boats, he used it to his advantage: the rippled surface made the fish less wary. Instead of sight fishing the points for reluctant large-mouths, he sight fished for spawning shad, the principal forage fish in the lake. He surmised brilliantly that if he could find the spawning shad, aggressive and ready-to-strike smallmouths would be nearby. And he was right: he had his limit by 10 a.m. on Sunday morning and spent the rest of the day catching more fish and culling out the smallest in his live well. At the final weigh-in, his 61-pound, four-day total was still two pounds ahead of his closest contender, and he was taking a \$100,000 check to the bank.

Was it a brawl in the Blue Ridge, a slugfest reminiscent of Sonny Liston or Mike Tyson? Not at all. Kevin VanDam, the pro's pro, shone as brightly as the best of the best we've ever seen in any arena, like the sweet science practiced by Ali in his glory days—an artful, awesome champion.

### If you go

The Elites will return to Smith Mountain Lake in August next year for the

final tournament of the regular season. You can watch the current series by tuning into ESPN2 or track the events on ESPN.com/Outdoors.


The Mariner's Landing Resort will again be headquarters for the Blue Ridge Brawl in 2010. The two-bedroom suites overlooking the lake offer an ideal base for the tournament, and can provide dock space for your boat if you want to join the on-the-water gallery, [www.marinerslanding.com](http://www.marinerslanding.com). Other attractions can be found on the Web sites for Bedford County and Franklin County, Virginia.

If you really want to be in the thick of the action, check out ESPN's Marshals Program. For a very modest charge, you can spend the first three days of the tournament right in the boat with three different Elite anglers. It's the opportunity of a lifetime to learn from the best of the best. And there is nothing to compare with clearing the no-wake zone at the morning launch and riding the back of a candy-colored, tangerine-flake streamlined shark at 70 mph hunting a \$100,000 bass.

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