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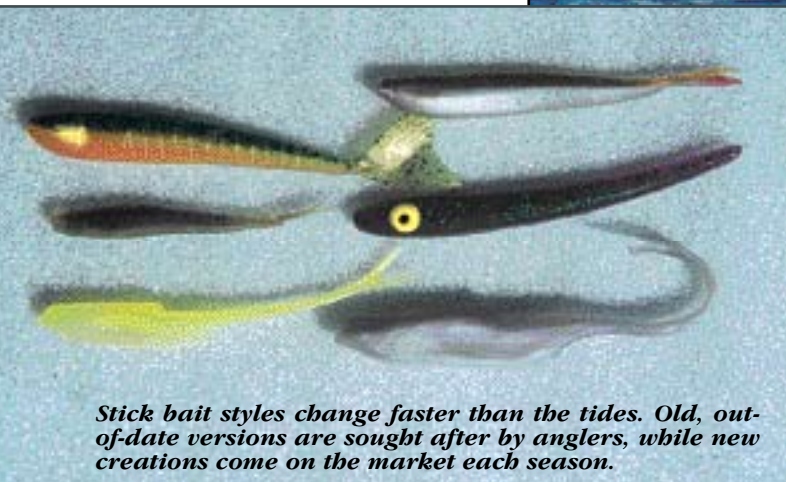
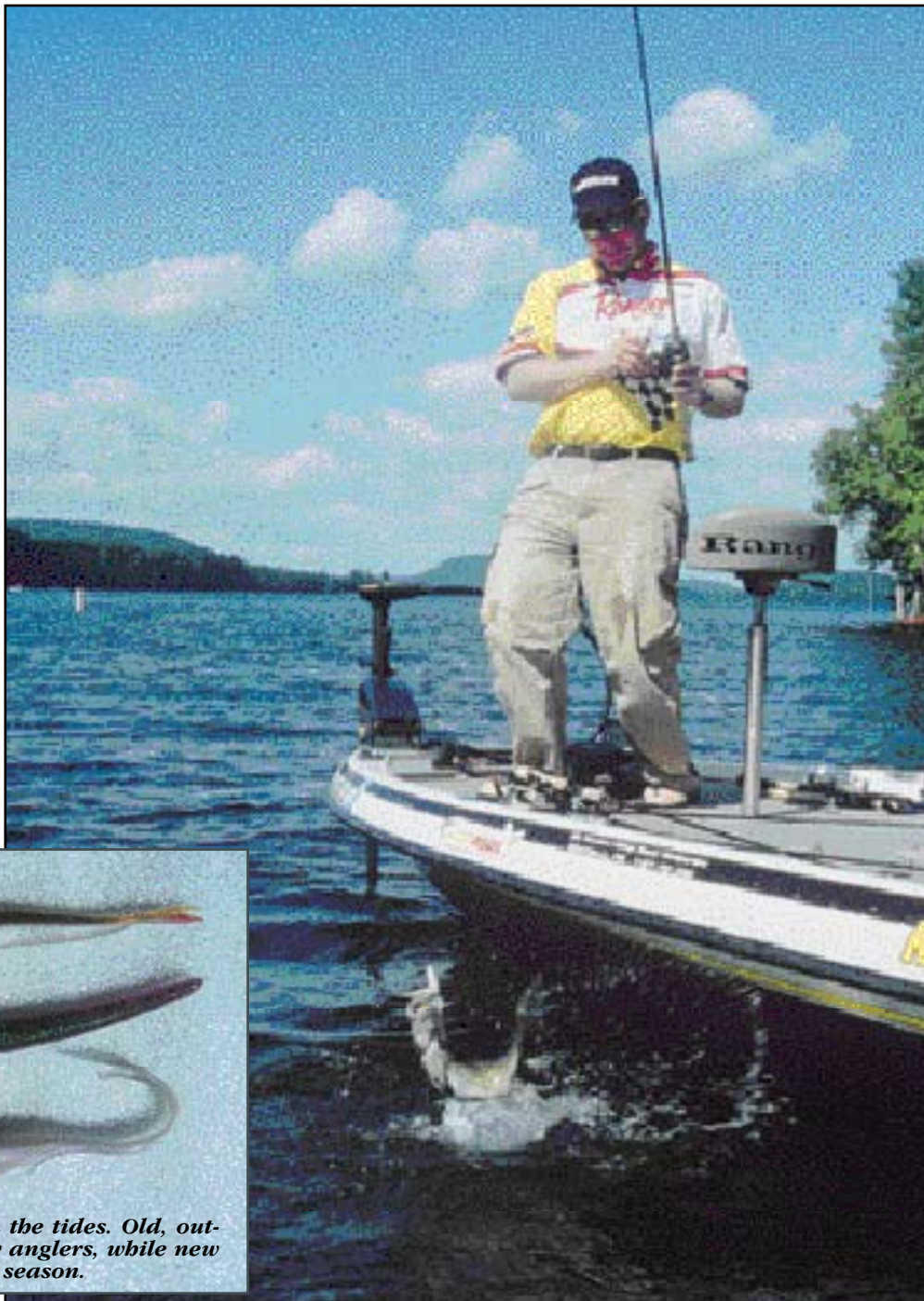
On Straight-Bodied Soft-Plastic Lures

Story and Photos By Vic Attardo

Whether they're called stick baits, twitch baits, jerk-baits or jerk shads, the various forms of straight-bodied soft-plastic lures that are a mainstay in most anglers' arsenals share many similarities. All of the lures are built from a chunky piece of plastic or biodegradable material. Their action in the water is determined as much as by what the angler does with his rod as their form and construction. These baits also are incredibly versatile, capable of working the surface, the shallows and, with the right rigging, even deep water.

The basic design of a soft stick bait incorporates a blunt front and rear. Overall, the bait looks like an unsmoked cigar. Jerk shads are also straight and bulky but have a fish tail and a rounded belly. Many jerk shads even have a belly pocket in which to place the hook shank.

In addition to the lures' shape, the fundamental rigging of these baits is universal, and the specialized rigging that's good for one is



Stick bait styles change faster than the tides. Old, out-of-date versions are sought after by anglers, while new creations come on the market each season.

often good for another. Naturally, pro anglers have individual twists and tricks in modifying and rigging these plastics. With minor alterations, pros can achieve better hooksets and also execute some unique actions.

"With a jerk shad, I don't use an extra-wide-gap hook because it takes away from the bait's action," says veteran bass pro Larry Nixon. "Also, I don't have to Tex-pose the bait because 90 percent of the time I'm swimming the lure, and when you go by cover, you can actually twitch it away."

In addition to Texas-rigging both styles of baits, Nixon also fishes the straighter cigar plastics wacky style.

"When I rig it wacky style, I insert the hook all the way through the body," he explains. "It's totally exposed."

Some pros manage to achieve longer casts with no additional weight by paying attention to the style and weight of the hook. They also improve the visual appeal of the bait by choosing a tinted hook. While some might argue the latter is an unproven alteration, pros who employ colored hooks say it gives them a lift of confidence.



Pro angler Lee Cepero gives a special action to his stick baits by cutting off the head of the lure and using the shortened body on a hook with a bullet weight.

Alabama angler Randy Howell modifies the rigging of his soft-plastic jerkbaits by often selecting a weighted and tinted hook. One of Howell's favorite lures is the 5-inch Berkley Jerk Shad. He uses the fluke-style bait around shoreline cover and when fishing for schooling bass. The five-time Bassmaster

Classic qualifier often fishes the Jerk Shad weightless. When long casts are needed, he rigs the bait with a 3/0 Daiichi Fat Gap Bleeding Bait hook, which is a deep-bend hook. Bleeding hooks are tinted dark red, while Fat Gaps are used for wide-bodied baits.

"This is a heavy hook, and it allows me to cast farther with no added weight on the plastic," Howell says. "I like the red hook because I think it gets more reaction bites."

The heavier hook also affects the action of the bait.

"With a jerkbait, the heavy hook gets it to sink down a little bit faster," Howell says. "The bait is not floating. It's falling every time you stop it. It resembles a dying, fluttering baitfish."

When distance casts are required, Howell throws the heavy-hook bait on a 7-foot medium-heavy rod. Another key to his presentation is the use of a thin-diameter fluorocarbon line that enables him to cast farther and get a better hookset than with stretchy monofilament. He uses 14-pound test Berkley Vanish.

"The 14-pound test is a good in-between line because you don't want to go too heavy for casting distance or too light that you break bass off," Howell says.

To rig the shad-style baits, Howell inserts the hook point about 1/8 inch into the tip of the lure, bringing the point out on the centerline of the belly and rotating the shank 180 degrees. As he turns the plastic, he wants the head of the bait on the offset portion of the hook shank. He also pulls the plastic over the hook-eye and knot. With the point

Give More Action To Your Twitch Baits

Florida pro Lee Cepero achieves an exceptional action with a twitch bait when he bites off the head of the lure and uses the shortened body on a hook. The motion he produces with his altered lure makes the bait swing like the last car on a derailed roller coaster. Cepero typically uses a Zoom Super Fluke.

"I cut off about three-quarters of the body from the front of the bait, then I peg the shorter fluke with a bullet weight to give it a special action," Cepero says.

In effect, Cepero is starting with a blunt-headed soft plastic with more tail than body. To rig the shortened twitch bait, he uses a 3/0 wide-gap hook and a tungsten Excalibur TG weight. The weight is pegged in front of the hook-eye.

As Cepero demonstrated on Florida's Lake Toho, the rigging produces a quick rolling or jumping presentation that is excellent for shallow water or bedding bass.

In working the bait, Cepero lifts and drops the rod tip to facilitate the action. The stick bait follows along in a wavy presentation. On the lift, the bait acts as if it is climbing a watery mountain. On the drop, it trails behind the weight as if it were sliding down the back end. At rest, the long tail of the fluke stands nearly vertical and undulates with the current.

This action drives bedding bass crazy and is also perfect for fishing pockets in a weedbed. In the latter instance, Cepero swims the headless fluke until it reaches an exposed patch, then he allows it to drop into the opening. Depending on the size of the pocket, he'll make a series of short hops with the bait, or he may lengthen the jumps so that he quickly crosses the opening. The mood of the bass also determines the motion he gives the bait. — Vic Attardo

facing the centerline of the bait's belly, he drives the point through to the opposite side.

"With the jerkbait rigged up like that, you get a side-to-side Zara Spook-type motion," Howell says. "When you twitch it in the water, it darts right, left, up and down. It's real erratic, and it doesn't have one particular motion. Sometimes you'll make it do something and then try to make it do the same thing again, and you can't. It has a mind of its own, depending on where the lure is on the hook."

According to Howell, if you catch a fish on the bait and it tears it up, you have to stick the hook a little deeper down the bait. "This makes it cut more to the right or whatever," he explains. "It becomes even more erratic, and that's why I think they're such good baits."

Creating a unique action is often the motivation behind modifying and rigging a soft-plastic stick bait. Some pros begin with a clear picture of what they want their bait to accomplish, then go about cutting, splicing and grafting the plastic until they get what they want. Other anglers achieve unique stick bait actions by selecting a bait they like, then making adjustments until a motion comes along



Working soft stick baits, rigged either Texas or wacky style, next to the big roots of cypress trees is an excellent technique for summer bass.

that catches fish. As one pro told me, this is the "oh, wow" factor.

"If I mess around enough with my sponsor's baits, I'm bound to find something that will work," the pro said under a promise of anonymity. "When I do, it's 'oh, wow!'"

Perhaps it doesn't matter if the action is achieved by accident or by

design. Getting a distinct motion is the important effect.

"On the Jerk Shad, I actually try to leave a little bit of a hump in it when I stick the hook back in," Howell says. "It's no more than a pimple, but with a little bit of a hump, it goes better from side to side. If you rig the bait perfectly straight, it tends to

be more stick-like and dives more, popping up and down. With the little bit of a hump, it will go right, left, right, left, and you can get a cadence going with it — a walking the dog kind of thing.”

Nixon’s wacky style of fishing the 6-inch Sinking Minnow also gives the bait a unique action.

One type of jerkbait rigging that swept into tournament circles in recent seasons was practiced by so many anglers that you’d be hard pressed to acknowledge any one pro as its inventor. Nevertheless, the modification is so distinctive that it rates a description all by itself.

It falls into the “by design” school of rigging and initially became popular on Florida’s Lake Okeechobee. Apparently a wise angler so liked the action that his buzzbait blades made on the surface that he wanted to achieve the same splashy, gurgling movement with a soft-plastic bait.

On a Gambler Flapp’n Shad, a single notch was cut on one side of the bait’s wide, flat tail. The plastic was rigged without any weight and then retrieved across the surface. When pulled at the proper speed, the notched Flapp’n Shad spit and sputtered similar to a small buzzbait.

Actually, the wake the notched

twitch bait makes is more subtle than most buzzbaits, and the action drives bass crazy.

I was first given one of the modified baits to try around a shallow grass bed. Holding the rod tip at the 11 o’clock position, I retrieved the bait with a moderate speed, keeping the head just on the surface. The lure spewed tiny droplets to its sides and created a small V in its trail.

No sooner had I gotten the notched shad to the edge of the grass, a good bass blew up on it. Being too quick with my hookset, I missed the first strike. But when the bass twisted and rushed at the bait a second time, I did what you’re supposed to do with a buzzbait — feel the weight before striking. This time I had a sure hookset.

As other pros have demonstrated, you can increase or decrease the sputter of the bait by making notches of various sizes or by shortening or deepening the cut in the tail. Besides the Gambler Flapp’n Shad, the effect can be achieved with a number of soft baits that have an appropriate tail. In fact, switching baits and alternating the size of the cut is a trick some pros are using to appeal to bass they’ve already

pressured.

It seems the rigging and modifications you can make with soft-plastic stick baits are nearly endless. Each season someone comes up with something new and different, and this alteration becomes the rage of the day. Then along comes another new stick bait design, and the whole thing starts all over. Of course, that isn’t so bad, because while anglers are presenting modified baits, they’re keeping the bass guessing. And a fooled bass is often a livewell bass. 🎣

Manufacturers Mentioned

Daiichi hooks

(334) 567-2011

www.daiichihooks.com

Excalibur (TG weights)

1-800-531-1201

www.lurenet.com

Gambler Flapp’n Shad

(954) 969-1772

www.gambler-bang.com

Pure Fishing (Berkley/Vanish)

(712) 336-1520

www.purefishing.com

Zoom Baits

(706) 548-1008

www.zoombait.com