



# ROUGH COMPANY

THE POPULARITY OF BOWFISHING IS SURGING ACROSS THE COUNTRY, BUT NOWHERE IS THE SPORT OF SKEWERING CARP MORE CELEBRATED THAN AT THE WORLD'S LARGEST BOWFISHING TOURNAMENT, HELD EACH SPRING IN THE HEART OF THE OZARKS

BY NATALIE KREBS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT NAGER



Omaha's Team Domeshot boated 360 pounds of fish to take 16th place in the U.S. Open Bowfishing Championship.





Clockwise from left: Briceson Lanphar draws on a fish; the Lanphars celebrate a catch; carp in a cooler; trucks depart the starting line; hundreds of rough fish.



# “SHOOT IT!” SHANON LANPHAR HOLLERS AS HE SPINS THE BOAT AROUND, WATER SLAPPING AGAINST THE HULL. “THERE IT GOES! C’MON! SHOOT IT!”

Shanon’s son Briceson grabs his bow and scrambles to the side, scanning the waves. The teenager draws and releases. A miss. He reels hastily and nocks for a second shot when another arrow parts the water. His uncle, Travis Lanphar, reels in the target—a sodden map of Missouri’s Table Rock Lake. Moments earlier the wind had ripped the map from Travis’ grasp and flung it into the wake of the modified johnboat. Now the dripping map wilts in his broad hands, an irregular hole punched through the belly of the Ozarks.

Shanon claps a hand on his brother’s shoulder and together they inspect the serpentine sprawl of this impoundment of the White River. Somewhere behind the hills, the sun is setting. The motor roars and the boat speeds away.

## MAIN ATTRACTION

The Lanphar family drove more than a thousand miles from their hometown of Haines City, Fla., to Branson, Mo., last May. The latter is known as the Las Vegas of the Midwest, but the Lanphars came for an entirely different kind of entertainment: bowfishing for carp, gar, and buffalo.

Rough fish, trash fish, non-game fish—no matter what you call them, they’re a

big enough draw that 900-plus archers from 27 states traveled to the Missouri Ozarks to compete in the second annual U.S. Open Bowfishing Championship. More than \$45,000 in cash and prizes—including a cool \$10,000 to the first-place winners—creates additional incentive. Not only is this region home to the tournament’s sponsor, Bass Pro Shops, but the twin lakes of Table Rock and Bull Shoals provide enough elbow room for all those shooters—and more than enough fish to fill their boats.

Although gar and buffalo are native species, introduced common carp have slowly been crowding out local flora and fauna for decades (as opposed to invasive Asian grass carp, which have spread up Mississippi River tributaries only in the last 20 years), and their increasing densities are jeopardizing healthy water systems.

The U.S. Open Bowfishing Championship provides an opportunity for a little payback, because in bowfishing, one thing is for sure: Catch-and-release is not an option.

## THE ARROWS FLY

The centerpiece of the three-day event is the 12 hours of sanctioned competition fishing, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. on the second night.

The team that shoots the 20 heaviest fish takes home the top prize.

Many competitors customized their boats with welded shooting platforms and searing HID lights that produce upward of 200,000 lumens. An hour before the nocturnal bowhunt starts, a procession of half-ton diesels towing these tricked-out boats winds through the dusty event grounds. Drivers file past officials and cheering crowds. Horns blare as teams head to the dozens of launches on the two lakes. Competitors arrived as much as a week in advance to scout, and the time has come to put that recon to work.

Some teams sport matching uniforms splashed with sponsor logos, but the Twisted Limbs, as the Lanphars are known, wear jeans, flannel, and camouflage. Caps and polarized shades conceal the brothers’ matching shaved heads and clear eyes, but their beards are hard to miss. True to their Sunshine State background, the shooting platform on their boat is made of aluminum floorboards reclaimed from an old citrus truck.

“I’m going to tell you right now: Bowfishing is super addictive. It’s going to take all your money from you,” Travis says with a laugh as he twists around in the truck’s passenger seat. “It’s a blast, though. We grew up fishing traditionally, but I haven’t picked up a rod and reel since I started bowfishing. And that’s amazing because I build fishing rods for fun.”

Shanon pulls into a convenience store parking lot. Snacks and caffeine will fuel the all-nighter ahead. Another truck pulls up. If the stadium lights hanging off the boat it’s towing don’t immediately identify the truck’s passengers, the decals plastered to the back window do. One reads in all caps, AIM LOW.

It’s just after 7 p.m., and Briceson, 14, squirms in the backseat of his dad’s truck. He’s so excited he can’t stop talking.

“At school they always ask, ‘How do you get the arrow back?’ So I tell them, ‘You have to swim down there and get it.’”

Laughter erupts from the front seat.

“This. This is why I love doing this, right here.” Shanon jabs a thumb over his shoulder. “I love the fact that he goes outdoors and does this stuff. It’s something that me and him and my brother can do together. He’s excited about it. He loves it, and I love that. A lot of kids—you don’t see that anymore.”





Left to right: Sunset signals game on; a full quiver; Parker Watkins of Arkansas; supporters at the tourney grounds; Shanon Lanphar hoists his 54-inch gar; early-morning weigh-in; JR Shimon practices with his son; a fat carp; Rich Porter (right) and Nick Wright take aim.



### PRIMITIVE EVOLUTION

Even in its second year, the U.S. Open was booming, and the 2015 contest is slated to be even larger (see below). Bowfishing tournaments are nothing new—local clubs have been running their own for decades—but many bowfishers say such a large-scale event wasn't viable until recently. A few years ago, no one would have guessed this back-channel pastime could draw nearly a thousand competitors from coast to coast, including archery-industry veterans like Dave White.

When White purchased the manufacturing company Cajun Archery in 2004, bowfishing gear made up roughly 10 percent of the company's product line. By the time Bear Archery bought Cajun Archery in 2012, that figure had risen to 70 percent—no small feat considering the growth occurred during the Great Recession.

"Bowfishing was picking up in popularity anyway, and the cost of getting into it wasn't prohibitive, so it grew despite the recession," White says. "Archery wasn't hurt so bad, but it didn't expand like the bowfishing niche."

White's company specialized in arrows and points, and manufactured basic starter kits that sold for around \$30. These proved to be a gateway product, as retailers reported tremendous response: Customers almost always returned to upgrade.

Former Cajun Archery pro-staffer Rich Porter is currently the tournament director for Bowfishers of Nebraska, and he has been the Bowfishing Association of America's Nebraska state representative for more than a decade. He's shot fish in 17 states and has personally introduced about 500 newcomers to the sport. In short, the guy is a junkie. He also has a couple of theories about the sport's popularity: It's cheap and accessible to beginners, and there are more targets swimming around than ever before.

"More than anything else, Asian carp have really put bowfishing on the map in the last 10 years," Porter says. "I used to bowfish one month out of the year, in May. Since the invasion of the Asian carp, I'm usually looking at a three- to four-month season."

### BACKWOODS BOYS

Twisted Limbs got their name from the old, warped Ben Pearson recurve Travis

and Shanon shared when they first started bowfishing. These days, the Lanphars all shoot their own Oneida Osprey.

"It feels like a recurve but shoots like a compound," Briceson says of the hybrid rig in his hand, keeping his eyes on the water below.

It's 8:30 p.m., and the team is trolling the steep shores of Table Rock. Insects swarm the halo of light surrounding the boat, but the clear water doesn't reveal any fish. The first passes along the banks presented opportunities for carp, but a volley of arrows didn't stick anything. Over the course of a night, bowfishers will typically shoot dozens, even hundreds of times. Most archers keep their draw weight at about 40 pounds to prevent exhaustion, and in the interest of speed they draw without a release.

At home, the Lanphars shoot tilapia and catfish in murky water that's 6 feet deep at most. Now the team is adjusting to greater depths and superb water clarity, which makes accounting for refraction even more challenging. Even the oft-repeated mantra "aim low" isn't helping—yet.

After an hour on the water, Travis breaks the spell and dumps a gar in the boat. As soon as it hits the metal, Shanon spots another and lunges toward the platform edge. "That's way bigger than yours!" he yells.

He sinks a barbed arrow into the spine of a huge longnose. With a lot of teamwork and scrambling, they heave the bloody gar on board. "That's a hell of a fish!" Shanon bellows. "It got my heart pumping!" Travis returns his younger brother's high five. "That thing is huge!"

A buffalo swims under the boat. Briceson swivels and lets loose an arrow. "That was deep, Bri," Travis says with a laugh as he slaps his nephew's back. "We'll get 'em in the shallows, right? Those deep ones are tough."

Sure enough, at 9:24 p.m., Briceson connects with his first fish of the night, a carp. "Nice one, Bubba!"

Shanon's big fish is still thrashing in the bottom of the boat when, 20 minutes later, he hauls a third gar aboard. Everyone is reinvigorated, ready to tackle the night ahead.

### RISING THROUGH THE RANKS

Andy Cardwell, a Kentucky native and the new president of the Bowfishing Association of America, began bowfishing at the age of seven in the early 1980s. He shot a recurve fitted with an old coffee-can reel for spooling line. Eventually he graduated to a compound, and now he shoots the best rig money can buy.

"It's just like any hunting hobby," Cardwell says. "You can start out bowfishing for just dirt cheap. But the problem is, once it gets in your blood, then it's not dirt cheap anymore. You find yourself buying a \$40,000 airboat. Then you have to buy a truck to pull the airboat. And then you have to build a shop to hold the truck and the airboat. Then you get divorced."

BAA was founded in 1990, and it primarily sanctions and insures tournaments.

## 2015 U.S. OPEN BOWFISHING CHAMPIONSHIP

This year, the stakes are even higher at the U.S. Open, which is scheduled for June 12–14. Bass Pro is giving away \$100,000 total in cash and prizes, including \$25,000 to the first-place winners. The event is relocating to Bass Pro's headquarters in Springfield, Mo. Fishing will be permitted on five lakes: Table Rock, Bull Shoals, Truman, Pomme de Terre, and Stockton. There isn't a deadline to enter, but you'd better hurry: The competition is capped at 275 teams. Go to [BASSPRO.COM/USOPEN](http://BASSPRO.COM/USOPEN) for more information.







**From top: Only a handful of competitors succeeded in popping a balloon suspended in the practice tank—even unmoving targets prove challenging; a gar at weigh-in; Twisted Limbs, from left: Travis, Briceson, and Shanon Lanphar.**



“It had never been run correctly, I’ll tell you that straight out,” Cardwell says, referencing the lack of an active member list and tournament records when he first took the job. His vision for the organization involves expanding bowfishing education and preserving the sport, and he hopes this will continue to encourage bowfishing’s explosive growth.

Cardwell fished the 2014 U.S. Open with buddy John Paul Morris on his boat *Blood Vessel*, a pontoon that evokes the shark-painted fighter planes of World War II. Morris, the son of Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris, calls bowfishing his favorite sport.

“The biggest thing we have going for us is that no one fishes traditionally for rough fish, so you’ve got this runaway population. They’re a lot like feral hogs,” Morris says. “It gives a great opportunity for guys to go out. There’s a lot of action and tons of fish everywhere. They’re helping the lakes and the rivers, and they’re having a blast.”

### MONSTER HAUL

Meanwhile, back on Table Rock, the Lanphars slog through a six-hour fishless drought. Finally, at 3:40 a.m., Shanon lands a carp with a clean strike. They decide to end their night on a high note and pull up to the official scales an hour later, exhausted. Their five fish weigh a tidy 54.6 pounds.

As other anglers filter in, so do the fish reports. Evidently, a cold snap the preceding week had severely disrupted the spawn. Carp drifted between deep water and the shallows, and teams experienced varying degrees of success. The winning team would tip the scales with 20 fish weighing a whopping 376 pounds. All told, the tournament removed 40,000 pounds of rough fish from the lake, which were later converted into soil fertilizer.

Twenty of those pounds belong to Shanon’s big gar, which measures 54½ inches. For a while, it’s in the lead for longest gar, an award that would pay out \$5,000. But as the sky lightens, more and more boats roll in, and it isn’t long before a gar tapping more than 5 feet long edges out Shanon’s. The Lanphars pull away from the weigh station, dog-tired but already discussing next year’s strategy, bloody water still sloshing across the floorboards of their boat. ▲▲▲

