

A Kick in the Boat

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Feeling the pinch
at the pump?
Try this alternative ...

Once upon a time and a generation or more ago, fishing from a "float tube" meant spending a lazy afternoon kick paddling around grandpa's farm pond in a patched-up inner tube once used on his tractor.

Even today, anglers can partake of such simple pleasures, for they are the very essence of what fishing fundamentally is all about. Taking the road less traveled is especially appealing as gas prices continue to climb, cutting into the cost of wetting a line by boat.

For some intuitive anglers, fishing from a rubber boat floated by air and maneuvered by kicking has become a high-tech affair. A case in point is the Sonoma County Belly Boat Bass Club affiliated with the BASS Federation Nation.

(Continued)

THESE KICK BOATS aren't your granddaddy's float tubes – they're highly specialized bass assault vehicles. Photo: Craig Lamb



TACKLING STORAGE

Because space is an issue and fishermen love to bring a ton of gear, prioritize your needs for a day fishing out of a kick boat. Photos: Craig Lamb

HOLD ON!

There are many inventive ways to pack multiple rods on these small crafts. Custom build one that meets your needs.

BELLS, WHISTLES

Portable electronics can be installed on float tubes, and can offer valuable information on the water to make your day more successful.

The California club rightfully acknowledges that its approach to bass fishing isn't for everyone, nor is it meant as a replacement for fishing from the venerable bass boat. On the flip side, slipping a belly boat into offbeat fisheries inaccessible to the big rigs is economical, fun and oftentimes rewarded with quality fishing.

"All that is true, and you can also spend whatever it takes to make you happy," notes Rich Caro, who organized the belly boat club in 1984. "Whatever floats your boat," he grins.

Call them belly boats, kick boats, float boats or just tubes, these obscure, low-slung rigs are indeed a satisfying means of taking a side trip to the roads less traveled in your bass fishing excursions.

FLOATING THE BOAT

Like Caro points out, any size and shape of inflatable craft fits the category, ranging from retrofitted tire inner tubes to tricked-out miniature pontoons. In the case of the Sonoma bass club fleet, no two belly boats are alike, which allows the ingenuity of the individual angler to shine through.

There are two routes to take when rigging out a belly boat from scratch. One direction is to fast track the process and spend the bucks on a fully outfitted rig. The other way to go, and the most economical and rewarding, is to customize a rig to suit your needs.

"You can always begin with a basic rig and then add accessories later," adds member Todd Iwamoto. "All it takes is planning and prioritizing about what fits your needs."

Take the do-it-yourself route and the fun begins when you've purchased the

basic boat. Accessories can be attached using basic hardware including cable ties, marine epoxy and PVC pipe available at your local home improvement warehouse or hardware store. From there, all it takes is sketching out the plan and prepping the tools needed to cut, drill, glue and screw everything together.

"The best way to spec it all out is by laying the boat out in your workshop and then taking measurements of the accessories to be sure they fit the scale of the layout," says Iwamoto. "You'll also want to have it all accessible and within arms reach. It's a trial-and-error process that you need to complete before you start drilling and fastening everything to the boat."

Following are the basic necessities found on the belly boat club fleet.

ROD HOLDERS: "You can make them from PVC pipe or buy pre-made holders," says Iwamoto. "Some of our guys have even retrofitted rod racks in their boats. That's where the imagination factor comes into play."

LIVEWELL: If you want to use the boat in a tournament then you'll want to leave room for a livewell and take into consideration the amps needed to run the aerator. "You can use a standard cooler or storage box," offers Iwamoto. "Custom boxes are better because they can be made of lightweight composite materials and cut down on the weight." Otherwise, the livewell can be used as a cooler for drinks and snacks, or as extra storage.

ELECTRONICS: Finding the balance between practicality and eye candy is the key with choosing electronic gizmos for a belly boat. A portable fishfinder is a basic necessity and again, it's important to determine if the battery power you choose for powering other

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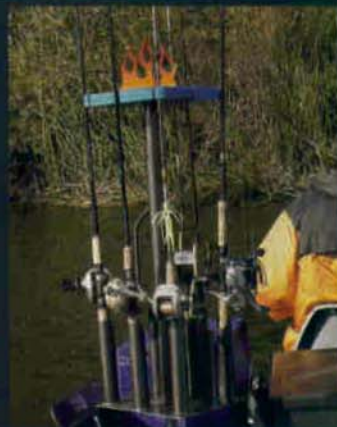
CATCH AND KEEP

When using a kick boat for a tournament, you'll need a livewell. A simple mesh bag and Styrofoam ring will do the trick.



SHEDDING POUNDS

Downsizing an entire tackle tray to just a few baits is a smart way to reduce weight, especially when the baits are cumbersome.



SHOW OFF!

Let your kick boat show your personality. You can have as much fun building the craft as you have fishing out of it.

accessories can carry the load. Fasten the transducer to a small piece of PVC pipe and the job is done. A GPS receiver can be a big asset, considering the current models come with mapping software, eliminating the need for maps. Best of all, the same GPS used to get you to that offbeat, off-road hideaway can be used for marking fishing hot spots.

NO OFF-LIMITS

The club is not handicapped by the size of its boats when weighed against California's diverse bass fisheries. Tournaments are held on the small lakes dotting the rolling countryside of the wine country north of San Francisco, where largemouth nudging the 20-pound mark are caught. And combustion engines are banned on many of them. Otherwise, the club's tournament trail makes stops at major tournament fisheries like the San Joaquin Delta and Clear Lake.

Impossible as it may seem, the belly boaters claim a distinct advantage when fishing in close quarters along the shoreline. "The stealth advantage allows us to sneak up on the fish instead of having a big 20-foot boat hovering over the top of them," claims Iwamoto.

"You are also at eye level with the water's surface, totally in tune with the immediate environment of the bass when compared to standing up on the bow of a bass boat," he says. "That gives you a better perspective on how to pattern the fish on a given day."

Belly boat fishing is a seasonal affair in many parts of the country, although it can be pursued year-round elsewhere. That is the case in California, where Caro relies on a topographic map to seek out potential fishing spots, keeping in mind a boat ramp is not necessary for getting in.

TRAVELING LIGHT

Downsizing and simplifying is all it takes to pack tackle for a belly boat trip, says Caro. Regardless, he points out you can store additional gear and tackle in the vehicle and repack as needed.

"Keep it simple with two plastic hard cases for hardbaits and a soft binder for plastics, spinnerbaits, frogs and buzzbaits," he recommends. "You can also add extra D-rings to carry more baits."

THE NEXT STEP

Fishing from a belly boat can be a fun, captivating means of hooking newcomers to fishing, as the club has discovered. One of Sonoma County Belly Boat Bass Club's original members, Skeet Reese, is now an Elite Series pro touring on the CITGO Bassmaster Tournament Trail.

"You can do this for fun or take it to the next level like Skeet has done," concludes Caro, who fishes from a retrofitted inner tube to this day.



GETTING STARTED

All it takes to get started is a sense of imagination and a sketch of what you want on a belly boat. The basic hardware can be found at your local home improvement warehouse. For details on the add-ons, must haves and wants, check out the following Web sites:

- **Sonoma County Belly Boat Bass Club:** www.scbbbc.com
- **Float Tube & Kayak Fishing Network:** www.fkpfishing.net
- **Fishing Kayaks Network:** www.fishingkayaks.net
- **PaddleFishing.com:** www.paddlefishing.com
- **FKP Warehouse (accessories):** www.fkpwarehouse.com