

## **12: Unintentional Intent**

**I**n professional bass tours, the blatant and obtuse ways of cheating, such as caging fish or putting weights down their throats, have been extremely rare. More problematic now is the bending of more nuanced rules that are ambiguous, especially regarding getting information inside the off-limits period, practice period or during a tournament. When considering these rules, the leagues rely on the word “intent” for interpretation. Was there intent to gain an advantage in obtaining the information? To be a rule infraction, it has to be more of a solicitation of information rather than an incidental acquisition of information.

In any sport, when the competition pool is of the highest caliber, the largest margins of advantage are often derived from the tiniest edges. In my opinion, leagues are naïve to this principle in tournament bass fishing. Maintaining an effective vigilance for such minute slivers of advantage is unrealistic.

The anglers in the game are supposed to effectively sequester themselves from any sources of information about the contest during the duration of the event. Anglers are forbidden from viewing live coverage or photos on the leagues’

media platforms. To be fair, it is a well-intentioned restriction. But things get murky once the daily coverage is disseminated through other public forums, social media channels and text messages. In a world where social media and text messages flow into our private phones all day, the objectivity of “intent” becomes more complex.

Well-meaning family, friends and fans watching the live coverage might send messages like: “Good luck tomorrow, don’t let those boys beat you with that shaky head!” Or “I can’t believe the leader is using a 10-inch swimbait!” Perhaps, “Every year, they always catch them on the North Shore.”

Maybe a photo in a social media feed shows an action shot of the tournament leader boating the fish with an identifiable lure or background.

Big-hearted local folks and fans at gas stations and restaurants quickly offer helpful pieces of fishing advice to pros. Lakeside landowners come down to offer tidbits about the recent fishing conditions around their dock. At some point, the pro must abruptly cut the Good Samaritan off and request that they say no more due to the rules. Sometimes, the unassuming folks get offended by the sudden dismissal of their offering because they are unaware of the context. During a tournament, pros are bombarded with these altruistic pointers at all times of the day.

These unintended transfers of information are all in good faith. For the most part, ethical pros already know how and where they will fish. But the point is, you can’t un-see something that’s been seen, and you can’t un-hear something that’s

been heard.

Most people have no idea how much information professional anglers can derive from the particles of the particulars. They don't need bones; they can solve mysteries with just a few fingernail clippings. How many unintended tidbits add up to a credible piece of information? At what point do those unintended fragments become more tempting to act on? Especially for a guy on the fence for a desperately needed check. When does the internal ego shift from unintentional to intentional? In today's age of instant gratification, the burning desire to know how fish are being caught can be revealed in one touch of a phone screen. It's a huge temptation. And what if an angler gets a random polygraph about receiving information during the tournament? Can the polygraph measure intent? This can get way farther into the weeds than anyone wants to go.