

Billheimer's excellent adventure

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*"California teen snags lead heading into tough Lake Havasu
finals; local leads co-anglers"*

Day 3 of the Tournament



LAKE HAVASU CITY, Ariz. - At a glance, it doesn't seem like much, but the 1-pound, 10-ounce lead that Stren Series rookie pro John Billheimer Jr. established over Jimmy Reese in Friday's first half of the Western Division final round is a ton.

Competitive fishing doesn't get a whole lot tougher than what the semifinalists experienced today. The sun was high in the sky over the desert impoundment, the fish are still touchy, and Lake Havasu just wasn't cutting anybody any slack. It's not that this lake can't produce fish, either; two years ago, when this tournament was held in March, Havasu coughed up largemouths and smallmouths in a downright Champlainesque manner. This week, especially Friday, it behaved much more like its stingy neighbor up the Colorado River, Lake Mead. Just two limits crossed the scale, and anything caught today that weighed more than 3 pounds was almost worth a wall mount.

That's why the four-bass catch weighing 11 pounds, 7 ounces brought in by Billheimer was such a feat. Making it even more remarkable, the rookie pro from Discovery Bay, CA., is just 16 years old and is fishing in his first-ever Stren Series tournament. "I'm nervous, dude," he said. "And I was really nervous onstage."

Fortunately for the young gun, it's not the stage that counts. No secret to anyone wandering around the trails near downtown, Lake Havasu City is Billheimer's fishing area. All day, snowbirds and commuters alike could have seen the young pro confidently working his crankbait beneath the famed London Bridge. He has spent all week in

the canal working the docks, bridge pylons and sandy bottom in search of the few, but substantial, largemouth bites that led him into the day-three lead.

"I only had four bites today and I got them all," he said. "I've caught all of my fish on crankbaits. I've only been getting two, three or four bites a day, but they've all been good fish."

And while nerves were the order of the afternoon, they belied a certain confidence that Billheimer has about his fishing pattern. While many top pros are fishing jigs or plastics among tules or down deep, the leader might just be onto something big with his crankbaits in the little canal.

"It's a timing thing. I would catch, like, one or two at a time. Then it shuts down," he said. "But when I was catching these crankbait fish, there would be four or five more right behind them. I think they're just a bunch of fish, moving up, getting ready to spawn."

That in mind, Billheimer plans to head right back to his post beneath the bridge Saturday morning in hopes of becoming the first 16-year-old Stren Series pro champion.

"I'm going to stick to the same stuff," he said. "I don't have anything else to go to, so I really couldn't change if I wanted to."

DAY 4 of the Tournament

Sixteen and sweet



Young pro John Billheimer Jr. goes to work in the Lake Havasu City canal early in Saturday's finals. (Photo by Jeff Schroeder)

LAKE HAVASU CITY, Ariz. - In a gripping showdown that pitted youth against experience at one of the toughest fishing tournaments in recent memory, 16-year-old John Billheimer Jr.

of Discovery Bay, Calif., became the youngest-ever Stren Series pro champion by catching 19 pounds, 12 ounces in the final round of the Western Division season opener at Lake Havasu.

The last two days, the young gun owned this event. Billheimer established an almost 2-pound lead over the rest of the Pro Division Friday with a four-bass catch of 11 pounds, 7 ounces. On Saturday, he went out and caught the heaviest sack of the day once again – three bass weighing 8-5 – winning over second-place Patrick Clement by almost 5 pounds.

And this was at an event where catching fish was about as difficult as squeezing blood from a stone. Obviously, thanks to the sunny and calm weather and a finicky prespawn bass bite that endured all week, nobody caught a limit on the final day. Only one other pro, third-place Jimmy Walker, managed to catch as many as three bass.

Additionally, the 16-year-old beat some of the wildest, well-worn sticks in the West. Clement, Walker and fourth-place Fred Ward are all veterans of the Western bass circuit with countless achievements among them. And that's not even mentioning fifth-place Jimmy Reese – the brother of tour pro Skeet Reese – whose last name alone just sounds like high-powered tournament fishing.

"Oh man, it hasn't sunk in yet," said Billheimer, who won over \$50,000 in prizes that included \$10,000 cash and a new Ranger boat. "It feels great, though. I never thought that I'd be fishing against Jimmy Reese or any of these guys this early in my career. No, it hasn't sunk in yet."

Even more notable was the sort of simplicity by which Billheimer won this event. He practiced for five days prior and only had three bites the entire time. When the tournament started Wednesday, he went to where he had his last bite and started throwing a crankbait. For most of the tournament's four days, anyone who wanted to had a front-row seat to watch as a 16-year-old win the largest pro bass tournament ever held in the West. He basically set up camp in one of the most accessible and visible spots on Lake Havasu: the canal beneath London Bridge, a top tourist attraction right in downtown Lake Havasu City.

"It was weird. I felt like I was on TV," Billheimer said. "I even had people following me today

like I was Mike Iaconelli or something."

Most of the week, Billheimer threw his red-crawdad Norman DD-22 crankbait in the clear, sandy-bottom canal and caught fish in about 10 feet of water, including a 6-pound, 2-ounce monster on day two. "I was out here practicing for five days and I only got three bites. So I didn't think I was going to catch any (in the tournament)," he said. "These fish, they were good

ones. They were just staging and getting ready to spawn. I just wanted to go out and catch as many as I could."

In Saturday's finals, however, the kid's luck changed. The slight wind he needed for the crankbait bite didn't show up by early afternoon and he only had one small keeper in the livewell, so he moved. But since he didn't

have any backup areas, he didn't move far, just to the Lake Havasu Marina at the bottom end of the canal.

"I had to switch up game plans, and I ended up catching two in the marina on a Senko," he said. "I just figured those fish would be a bonus if I could catch any there. I only had one keeper by 2:30."

They turned out to make all the difference. It was a clutch performance by the 16-year-old fishing his first Stren Series tournament.

"This is unbelievable," his mother said afterward. "We've been watching him all day, and we didn't see him catch any fish."

His proud father, John Billheimer Sr., seemed less surprised by his son's stunning win. "You know, if there's two seconds left and the game's on the line, he was always the kid who wanted the ball. So I'm very proud of him," he said. "It's very impressive because he has so much respect for all these guys out here."

