

Woods brothers tantalizingly close to first title Sixteen hours on the Floods comes down to less than an ounce

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In the closest finish in the forty-five runnings of the Atikokan Bass Classic, Mike Badiuk (Fort Frances) and Ian Waterer (Kenora) claimed the title over home town favourites Jared and Cody Wood. Their margin of victory was one-twentieth (0.05) of a pound, 45.31 to 45.26.

The final weigh-in was a nail biter all the way. Chris Warren and Chris Horde led the pack (39.76 lbs) before the top ten teams from day one rolled through the tent Saturday afternoon. They were knocked out of the leaders' seat by Mike Krassey and first-timer Owen Doerkson (39.92), but that pair didn't have time to get comfortable, as the Lowes (dad Jody and Shaina), eighth after day one, came in with a second twenty-pound bag (42.64 overall).

This year saw a record number of twenty-pound bags, with seventeen, and the most forty-pound totals yet, with seven. But Rene and Debra Cadene's two-day total of 46.88 (in 2019) remains the best ever.

2014 champions Bryan Gustafson and Jon Austin would be the next occupants of the hot seat. Their 22.30 lb bag Friday was good for sixth place, and Saturday's 21.53 put them in the top spot and them there through weigh-ins by Kevin Ritchie & Kyle Huillery and Travis Zimak and Travis Schallock.

When the Woods brothers came in with 21.45 lbs to take the lead, the full house under the Big Tent roared its approval.

But they were immediately followed by Badiuk & Waterer and that narrowest of margins. There was still some hope for a local champion as 2013 winners Steven and Todd Bryk rolled into the tent. The father-son team set the single day bag record on Friday with 25.25 lbs. They showed off a couple of big ones, but it was pretty apparent they knew they didn't have the twenty-pounds plus it was going to take to win it again. Their 17.44 lbs left them in fourth.

It was just the second appearance at the Classic for Badiuk & Waterer; they finished fourth last year with 40.48 lbs. Waterer is an NWO fishing star. He won the Fort Frances Canadian Bass Championship fishing with Motei Demers last year, and just missed this year, finishing second to Bryan Gustafson and Mike Luhman. (Gustafson and Luhman fished together here last year and finished second.)

The whole top ten this year was made up of usual suspects. The only newcomers were tenth-place finishers Parker Sampson & Cole Krassey, in their second year as partners.

(Actually, there were two other newcomers: Owen Doerkson (his partner, Mike Krassey, had two top ten finishes with Jason Dragan), and Travis Schallock (fishing for the first time here Trevor Zimak, a five-time champion with Glenn Leroux).)

Chris Horde and Chris Warren matched their ninth place finish of 2015. They ran into all kinds of problems last year and finished in eightieth spot. That jump from eightieth to ninth was, surprisingly, not the best year-over-year improvement in placing. Kevin Ritchie and Kyle Huillery went from 101st last year to eleventh this year, and Dale Gaudry and Kelly Maguire moved up seventy-seven places to twenty-ninth.

Eli & Ben Anderson, sixth this year, were fourth in 2018. The Loews were sixth last year and seventh in 2018; Shaina teamed with brother Austin to place second in 2019.

For the Bryks, their fourth place finish was the eleventh time they've made the top ten since the Classic moved to the Floodwaters in 2008.

In addition to their 2014 win, Gustafson & Austin had four other top ten finishes.

Changes coming

There were a lot of worried anglers around as the week progressed. Pre-fishing got ever more difficult, and by Thursday it was cool (high 20°C), wet, and very windy (gusts up to 47 kph were recorded in town). But the skies brightened Friday and the wind eased (although gusts of thirty plus kph were still evident in town) in time for the tournament, and by Saturday it was hot (near 30°C) and the winds had calmed completely.

Lisa and Jim Johnson, co-chairs of the event since it moved to the Floodwaters in 2008, announced next year would be their last. Jimmy shared the emcee duties this year with Jamie Braun, who would make an excellent successor with the mic. But it's going to take a lot more to fill the role the Johnsons have played in leading the tournament over the past decade-plus. Here's hoping some younger angling fans step up over the next year in anticipation of the changeover coming to the committee.

