

Tough Bite, Quality Fish at Don Pedro Kokanee Power Derby

The 2021 Kokanee Power Phil Johnson Memorial Derby was held at Don Pedro Reservoir on June 12. It featured mild weather and tough fishing. Those who persevered were rewarded with quality kokanee along with some bonus kings, rainbows, and even some largemouth bass. Having never visited Don Pedro Reservoir myself, the three-day adventure was a great introduction to the diverse Central Valley fishery.

In an earlier start time than usual, I carefully went over a trip checklist in front of my house. I entered the address into my pickup's navigation screen and waited for my route to load. I looked at the clock in my pickup truck. It read 2:45 AM. It was time to hit the road.

As I drove south, the new moon cloaked the landscape in darkness - my headlights didn't reveal much. I would have to wait until dawn to get my first glimpse of the scenery.

After launching at the Fleming Meadows

ramp in darkness, the first gray of morning appeared as I made the long stroll down to the dock. As I motored into Middle Bay, shapes that at first resembled a flock of sheep resolved into round boulders clumped on a hill. The increasing daylight revealed steep rocky walls that reminded me of Lake Oroville further to the north.

I spent my first day of pre-fishing exploring different areas of the lake. The fishing was decent, allowing me to land eight kokanee and lose a handful of others. The 14 to 16 inch kokanee were holding between 40

and 60 feet deep. Feeling satisfied with my work for the day, I headed into camp around 4:00 pm to prepare for the next day.

On Friday morning, I worked some different areas of the lake with not much to show for it. Hatch Creek, Big Oak Island, and Jenkins Hill turned up a few marks but not many strikes from the kokanee. As the morning progressed, more pre-fishing derby boats



**WHAT'S
HOT**
by
Jack Naves



Bob Hamilton shows off a hefty Florida-strain largemouth bass caught while trolling for kokanee. The 19.5" bass hit a Pink Tiger Uncle Larry's Spinner trolled behind a gold Vance's dodger at 53' deep. Bob landed the bass while pre-fishing with derby partner Rich Crispi. Bob and Rich found some nice kokanee on derby and took second place in the adult team division.

showed up, and most were struggling just as I was. My derby partner Jim

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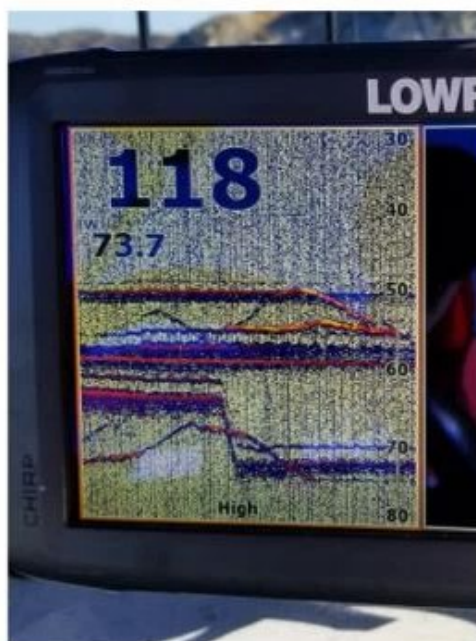
Brittain drove into camp later that evening, and we devised a game plan for the next morning.

Jim and I got an early jump on the launch ramp, making it necessary for me to use my spotlight as we ascended north into Middle Bay. As would be expected, I was not the only one who found a good bite in that area while pre-fishing. Of the 72 teams entered in the derby, I would say that at least half of them were piled into the northeastern corner of Middle Bay. As the 5:30 am start time commenced, we dropped our lines and joined the downrigger gunning armada of kokanee boats.

At first light, all was calm. No nets flew, and boats started to scatter out. Jim landed a nice rainbow trout from 60 feet down, but still no kokanee. After circling a small cove and heading north, I saw a nice mark at 60 feet on the sonar.

"Mark at sixty", I called out. I jumped to the back of the boat and lowered my rod set at 55 feet down another five feet. As I tightened the clutch to stop the weight, my line popped out of the clip - the rod went limp. In a panic, I reeled as fast as possible to get the slack out of the line. Finally, the line went tight the rod started pumping - our first kokanee hookup of the day! After a few strong runs, we soon had a fat sixteen-inch kokanee in the net. We were able to scratch out three more kokanee early, but around 9:00 am the bite went dead.

Kokanee fishing has typical hot and slow periods, but the shutdown during the Don Pedro derby was



The yellow squiggly lines are fish. The straight and horizontal lines are downrigger balls and clips. In this photo, you can see how these fish ignored offerings trolled past them and dropped onto them. Excessive downrigger balls, humming cables, and sonar pings can shut the bite down when too many boats converge on any given area.

Photo by Jack Naves

one of the worst I've ever seen. We hooked several more fish, but all of them came off. Finally around 11:30 am, we landed our fifth and final kokanee of the day. It wasn't for a lack of fish.

We ran our downrigger balls through dozens of marks, only to have nothing happen. We tried all of the usual tactics and maneuvers to draw strikes, but those Don Pedro kokanee would not snap! The barrage of downrigger balls and sonar pings had almost completely shut the bite down. Never the less, it was a



These images reveal a kokanee strike on Jack Naves' underwater camera. Strikes like this were hard to come by on derby day. However, quality 15 to 16 inch kokanee were still caught by the 72 teams that entered the derby.

Photo by Jack Naves

fun morning of competition, and we had three nice 15 to 16 inch kokanee to weigh in.

We finally headed in a little after

1:00 pm to see how everybody was doing. The afternoon wind and legion of ski boats kicked up a chop that pounded the hull of the boat all the way back to the ramp. Heat waves shimmered off the concrete as I scaled the long hill up to the parking lot. With a sigh of relief, I started the truck and headed down the ramp for one last time.

Back at the weigh-in table, teams eagerly waited in line to see the results of their hard work. There was a smart phone app with live results, plus a live scale readout at the weigh-in table. The Kokanee Power volunteers did an excellent job of conducting the derby.

"3.89" pounds flashed in red above the weigh-in table on a large LED display. I had seen some heavier weights while standing in line, but I figured we were still in the running. As it turned out, we finished in tenth place.

Of the 72 teams, only 33 were able to weigh in three kokanee. It was a tough one! There were 24 trout and 8 kings weighed in for the side pots. Bass provided some bonus fights, but didn't count towards the derby. The results were as follows:

2021 Kokanee Power Phil Johnson Memorial Derby Results

Adult Team Kokanee (3 fish)

1. Doug & Ron Philpott 4.45 lbs.
2. Rich Crispi, Bob Hamilton 4.21 lbs.
3. Richard Contreras, Allison Contreras & Chris Miller 4.14 lbs.
4. Fred McAlister, Ron Lemos 4.13 lbs.
5. Sean McArdle, Jason Tidwell 4.03 lbs.

Junior Kokanee (1 fish)

1. Kaitlyn Contreras 1.37 lbs.
2. Jack Duvall Jr 1.28 lbs.
3. Emma Duvall 1.28 lbs.
4. Ty Collins 1.24 lbs.
5. Hunter Woodring 1.23 lbs.