

Monster-Sized Bags Dominate the 2023 New Melones Kokanee Power Derby



This year's Kokanee Power New Melones derby featured mild weather and huge kokanee. It all went down on Saturday, June 3, just south of the old mining town of Angels Camp, California. The town was made famous by Mark Twain's short story 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County'. It lies only minutes away from the large capacity reservoir known as New Melones Lake.

While the weigh-in is normally held at the Frogtown facility in Angels Camp, this year's event was held at the nearby town of Copperopolis. A late three o'clock weigh-in time was set to accommodate the approximate thirty-minute drive time from the lake. This writer's adventure began at 2:05 am on the morning of the derby.

BEEP-BEEP, BEEP-BEEP, BEEP-BEEP the backup alarm in my bathroom suddenly jolted me out of a deep sleep on the morning of the derby. I had accidentally set the alarm on my phone to PM instead of AM, a classic move straight out of a Seinfeld skit. Luckily, I always set a backup battery-powered alarm just in case of such a slip-up. Running a

few minutes late, I hustled out the door and made my way southeast to the land of jumping frogs.

My teammates Jim Brittain and Kyle Cobb were already waiting for me when I rolled up to the Tuttle town launch ramp a few hours later. We loaded my gear into Jim's boat and ran south in anticipation of the 5:30 am derby start time. With summer solstice quickly approaching, we had plenty of visibility provided by the glow of the eastern horizon.

We trolled along shady eastern points but didn't have any fish in the boat until the sun showed itself. Suddenly, Kyle's rod pumped down – he was hooked up with something good. I



WHAT'S HOT
by
Jack Naves



Derby winner James Franco of Epic Fishing Vibes stands with two massive kokanee he caught using pink and purple Apex lures on Saturday, June 3. The fish were caught trolling at 1.3 miles-per-hour between 30 and 35 feet deep in the Bear Creek arm at the southeast corner of the lake.

Photo courtesy of James Franco, Epic Fishing Vibes

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Richard Contreras (right) pilots the Brian Thomas Team's custom-wrapped boat across the tranquil surface of New Melones Lake on June 3. Their team came in second place at the Kokanee Power event with a monstrous 7.37 pound three-fish bag.

Photo provided by Kokanee Power

grabbed the net and lunged to the back of the boat while Jim piloted us forward. The fish made several runs before I could get a good look at it. I was hoping it was a big kokanee...but no...it was a trout! We were all disappointed that it wasn't a nineteen-inch kokanee, but it was a nice trout that we hoped would put us into contention for the big trout side pot.

Only a few minutes later in the glimmer of early daylight, Jim was able to boat a nice kokanee over seventeen inches in length! The morning bite shut off around 9:30 am, so we made our way north with one big kokanee and three smaller fish in the box.

Knowing we needed at least three kokanee over seventeen inches to be in contention, we started working a peninsula and hooked fish right away. For whatever reason, I couldn't keep them buttoned to my hooks. I must have lost at least seven fish after getting my rod out of the downrigger clip. Despite my inability to land fish, we put two more quality seventeen and eighteen-inch kokanee into the net, putting us into good standings back at the weigh-in table.

As the teams lined up, it was evident that one of the guys a few places behind me in line had a great day on the water. James Franco of Epic Fishing Vibes had a bag of what looked to be massive kokanee. In

this case, looks were not deceiving. James and his team posted a colossal three-fish total of 7.64 pounds, pushing them to the top spot in the team event.

I contacted James to ask about his day. He said that the bite really turned on after noon in the Bear Creek arm. His team was able to boat seven fish over 17.5 inches on the day! Any lures with pink or purple worked great, and the Apex lure caught many of the fish trolling at about 1.3 miles-per-hour. In addition to winning the main event, they also landed the big kokanee for the day at a whopping 2.87 pounds!

There was another huge turnout for this Kokanee Power event, which included 165 anglers on 70 teams. Kevin Smith of Kokanee Power indicated that this year's derby featured the largest kokanee ever weighed in at New Melones. There were twenty-four fish over seventeen inches in length, including seven fish over eighteen inches!

With New Melones turning out massive kokanee this early in the season, there are bound to be fish over twenty inches landed later this summer. I for one am chomping at the bit to get out this August when the big hook-jawed males school up down deep. Whether it be New Melones, or any of our other Northern California kokanee lakes, now is prime time



Casey (left) and Brody Code show off some chunky kokanee at the Kokanee Power New Melones derby weigh-in station in Copperopolis on June 3. Their fish were caught trolling from Rose Island south using mostly Apexes and Paulina Peak Flutter Bugs at 1.3 to 1.5 miles-per-hour. The weight of their three biggest fish propelled the team into eleventh place in the event.

Photo provided by Kokanee Power

to get out there land some tasty landlocked sockeyes. Be sure to visit www.KokaneePower.org to view upcoming derbies and events.

Adult Leaderboard - 3 Kokanee total (pounds)

James Franco, Jim Franco, & Denise Franco 7.64
Brian Thomas, Richard Contreras, & Chris Miller 7.37
Jack Schultz, Joe Aksamit 6.71
Jim Brittain, Jack Naves, & Kyle Cobb 6.38
Rich Crispi, Bob Hamilton, & Chad Terrell 6.13
Joe Smith, Danielle Limme 6.10
Jay Winchester, Harold Garabaldi 5.92
Dan Cowan, Chuck Holman, Jerry Knight, & Will Moore 5.66
Kyle Wise, Mike Tripp, & Ty Harris 5.51
Kirk Emge, Jerilyn Emge, & Tom Oliveira 5.47
Casey Code, Brody Code 5.36
Justin Ross, Mike Polcar 5.35
Sean Flanagan, Patrick Flanagan 5.35
Mike Giovacchini, John Zeman 5.24
Tim Hill, Warren Frederickson 5.14
Big Kokanee Side Pot - 1 Kokanee (pounds)
James Franco, Jim Franco, & Denise Franco 2.87
Brian Funkhouser & Eric Lengyel 2.73

Big Trout Side Pot - 1 Trout (pounds)

Matt Gil, Bethany Gil, Mike Gil, & Petti Gil 5.13
Tyrone Beard, Steve Anderson, & Kevin Enos 2.24

Junior Leaderboard - 1 Kokanee (pounds)

Daniel Clark 2.29
Alex Thomas 2.24
Aubrey McLennan 1.67
Mason Cetinich 1.49
Emma Vengley 1.43