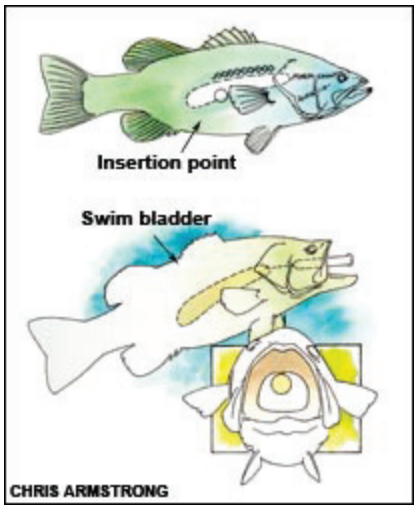

Some anglers fizz bass from the side (above), but experts suggest inserting the needle in the mouth (below).

Kirk Harbin has handled thousands of bass while helping conduct BASS events across the nation. During that time, he's saved many bass from certain death by performing a simple procedure known as "venting" or "fizzing."

"A lot of fish that are caught deep have problems," Harbin said. "Their swim bladders swell up with air. It's like a person getting the bends."

Harbin said bass come through the weigh-in scales, and then simply float in the release boats until he and other BASS workers use hollow needles to "release" some of the fish's built-up gases, increasing their odds of survival. This build-up is a particular problem at fisheries like Erie and Champlain where the majority of fish brought in are caught in deep water.

"We've vented thousands and never had a problem," Harbin said.

Oklahoma fisheries biologist and regular BASS Times contributor Gene Gilliland explained that a swollen bladder left untreated can wreak havoc on a bass internally.

"When the bladder swells up, it can start affecting other physiological functions like circulation and breathing," Gilliland said. "The swelling bladder pushes against other organs. Fizzing relieves that pressure."

The traditional fizzing method involves sticking a hypodermic needle — attached to a syringe without a plunger — into the side of a bass just behind the pectoral fin and slightly below the lateral line.

Gilliland said the bladder often will swell enough to produce a noticeable lump on the side of fish. "That gives you a target," he said.

However, it takes a good deal of practice to know exactly where to puncture the bass if this bubble isn't visible. Not knowing the right place is often a source of problems. Inexperienced anglers can sometimes do more harm than good by puncturing other internal organs.

Harbin opts for a relatively new procedure, which he said is easier and less intrusive. It involves opening the mouth of a lethargic bass and sticking the needle through the top of the gullet and directly into the bladder.

"You put the needle right at the line where the gullet starts and push the needle straight in about 1/8 inch," Harbin said. "You can hear the hiss when the needle punctures the [swim] bladder."

He then submerges both the bass and syringe while pushing the needle to get visual conformation that he's releasing gases.

"You can see the bubbles coming out," Harbin said. "You know exactly when [gas] starts coming out."

Gilliland said submerging bass is vital, no matter which method chosen.

"You've got to see bubbles coming out," he said. "You want to make sure you're actually venting the bladder."

Signs of deep stress

- Lethargic
- Lying on side
- Little movement
- Slow breathing
- Noticeable lump on side

Gilliland agreed that, once mastered, the through-the-throat method is effective and doesn't have as much potential to injure other internal organs.

"When you go through the throat, there's not much between the throat and the swim bladder," he said. "You generally don't have to puncture them more than once."

Gilliland said the needle should remain in the bladder until the bubbles stop, but a fish should never be squeezed.

"If you let too much air out of the bladder, you get a negative buoyancy and those fish sink straight to the bottom," he said.

Proper venting will have an almost immediate effect on bass.

"When you do it right, you'll feel the fish relax," Gilliland said.

Harbin said he's watched thousands of bass go from lethargic and dying to energetic as soon as his needle was removed.

"They act like nothing ever happened," he said.

Gilliland pointed out that "fizzing" won't save every bass, but it does up the odds of survival.

"Some fish might swim off and look healthy, but delayed mortality is still a possibility," he said. "However, fizzing will give fish that are stressed a greater chance of surviving."