

CALEDONIA – The challenge is part of the fun.

Throw in a little wind and plenty of waves and the challenge of catching a fish – let alone four or five in a day – becomes even harder.

But Brooks Higginbotham and Rigg McCrary aren't your typical fifth-graders. In fact, they probably have more patience than a lot of people who have fished many more years.

That patience served Higginbotham and McCrary well July 25-28 at the Bass Federation Junior World Championship. Representing the Upper Tombigbee Youth Student Anglers, the boys from Caledonia finished eighth on the Sooner Lake in Ponca City, Oklahoma.

"It was tough," Higginbotham said. "The fish weren't biting really good."

Said McCrary, "The wind was coming four feet over the boat."

The boys caught nine pounds of fish the first day and then five pounds, 11 ounces on the second day. Their total earned them one of 12 spots in the final day of competition. Even though they caught only one fish (three pounds, 11 ounces) that day, they were the only boat representing the state of Mississippi.

For perspective, 28 of the 52 boats that started the competition caught zero fish on the first day.

Higginbotham, 10, who attends Caledonia Elementary School, and McCrary, 11, who attends Heritage Academy, have known each other since they were 4 or 5 years old and played Wee Ball at Ola J. Pickett Park in Caledonia. Both started fishing when they were in the second grade at Caledonia Elementary School. In fact, Higginbotham and McCrary finished 19th in the world when they were in the second grade.

The latest finish marks the second time they have competed against participants from all over the world.

“I like fishing because you don’t know what is going to bite,” Higginbotham said. “When you go out there, you never know what is going to work. That makes it a challenge to get the fish to bite.”

Kellis Higginbotham, who serves as boat captain for the boys, said he and the boys found a practice spot on the first day of the event and decided to stay with it. From there, he said it was a matter of battling the elements – they had to buy more batteries for the trolling motor due to the wind – and staying patient as they caught more than their share of saugeye, not bass.

“We probably caught 100 saugeye,” Brooks Higginbotham said.

Said McCrary, “We caught at least 70 of them.”

Kellis said he has fished tournaments competitively for years and that Brooks accompanied him to the events as early as 3 years old. Brooks whetted his appetite by fishing and then running the trolling motor and then fishing and running the trolling motor.

Kellis said he and his family are friends with Rigg’s parents and he discovered their sons had similar interests, so he asked them if Rigg could join them when they went fishing.

“Their first tournament together was on Beaver Lake in the second grade,” Higginbotham said. “That was before we had shirts or anything. I think we caught three fish that day.”

Said Brooks, “We caught a bunch of fish, but none of them were keepers.”

Higginbotham and McCrary finished second in that tournament.

“They are very competitive,” Kellis Higginbotham said. “They are almost too competitive with each other in the boat. I have to remind them sometimes that they are on the same team.”

Kellis said Rigg has a slower fishing style that complements his son’s “crank and wind” style. He said he is working with the boys to help them become more well-rounded.

“They are well advanced to be 10 and 11 years old,” Kellis said. “They probably have better equipment than most adults, too, which helps.”

Higginbotham and McCrary thanked Phillips Construction, Burns Waste and Dirt, Galloway-Chandler-McKinney Insurance, Part City Murry Supply, Johnston Distributing Incorporated, Timmy Ming Drywall, The Fiberglass Shop, McCrary-West Construction, C&B Custom Tackle and IFISH for being their local sponsors.

For more information on how to get involved with the Upper Tombigbee Youth Student Anglers, contact Kellis Higginbotham, the assistant tournament director of the trail, at 662-570-8614.