



## 25 Years of Sun Country

The idea for Sun Country was conceived in 1984 when Tommy Tharp had a conversation with Forrest Wood of Ranger Boats during the 1984 Bassmaster Classic. During that conversation Tommy learned that Forrest was an avid deer hunter and that he would be in New Mexico later that year for a Bassin Gals tournament at Elephant Butte Lake. Tommy arranged to have Buddy Sanford and Jesse Lane of Alamogordo to tour Forrest through the Gila National Forest and the idea of having a major tournament circuit in the Southwest became a reality during that tour.

Tommy, Jesse and Buddy recruited Jack Cox, Charlie Durrett and Larry Shulse and the group appointed Jack Cox as President of the organization for the first two years. Charlie Durrett named the organization "Sun Country Bass Association" and performed all of the legal work necessary to make it happen. Jesse Lane was president of the New Mexico BASS Federation in 1985 and Jesse and Jack began publishing Big Mouth, which became the official publication for Sun Country and the New Mexico Bass Federation and was used to publicize Sun Country and its sponsors. Ranger Boats and Mercury Outboard became major sponsors and have continued in that capacity throughout our 25 years.

Sun Country was formed as a non profit organization with the directors volunteering their time and hosting the tournaments. The organization began as a Boater/Non Boater draw tournament circuit with both groups vying for the top 30 championship slots and the fully rigged Ranger/Mercury boat that was awarded to the championship winner. The first qualifying tournament was held in conjunction with the Alamogordo Open at Elephant Butte Lake in April 1985. Other qualifying tournaments were held in New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, some in conjunction with other open tournaments. The first Championship tournament was held on Martinez Lake, on the Colorado River in southern Arizona. None of the top 30 qualifiers had ever fished Martinez Lake prior to the tournament and the site was not announced until shortly before the tournament, keeping the location a secret for as long as possible. Many valuable tournament hours were consumed trying to get boats off of sand bars during that first championship----river fishing was a new experience for all 30 contestants. Dale Wagy of Elephant Butte, NM was the first Sun Country championship winner. Greg Smith of El Paso, TX was the first Angler of the Year.

Sun Country leadership was rotated among the original directors during the early years with Jesse Lane, Charlie Durrett, Larry Shulse and Tommy Tharp each serving as President. Ken Marlow and Doug Stewart came on board as directors shortly thereafter and each served as president as well. Early championship tournaments were held at Martinez Lake, Lake Powell, Lake Fork, Possum Kingdom, Lake Amistad and Elephant Butte Lake. Over the 25 years well over a dozen Classic qualifiers and BASS champions competed in and won Sun Country Events including Jay Yelas, John Murray, Ted Miller, Trent Huckabee and locals like Jesse Lane, Danny Gill, Joe Conway and more.

The organization continued throughout the ensuing years, but by the late 90s interest in draw tournaments in the area had waned, so some of the original directors and others, led by Tommy Tharp as president resumed management of the organization, changed the format to a team concept and focused tournament activity more toward the New Mexico, West Texas and Southern Colorado areas. Bruce Allred came on board as a director and stood up the Sun Country website which was instrumental in keeping the membership informed and advertising sponsors. Johnson Outdoors with Minn Kota motors came on board as a major sponsor in 2003. The sustained support of Ranger and Mercury with the addition of John Outdoors as a major sponsor, in conjunction with the revised format proved to be an instant success and Sun Country membership soon grew to new heights. Humminbird will come on board in as a sponsor in 2009, which will begin Sun Country's 25<sup>th</sup> year.