Felton makes big splash in Jocassee debut

By Scott Keepfer
OUTDOORS WRITER
skeepfer@greenvillenews.com

Ray Felton has fished at Lake Jocassee on a fairly regular basis since moving to the mountains a little more than two years ago, but he'd always bypassed the opportunity to enter one of the lake's several trout tournaments that are held each winter and spring.

Eventually, however, his competitive nature got the best of him.

A former three-time all-Big South decathlete at Coastal Carolina who still competes in road races, triathlons and mountain bike events, the 27-year-old Felton decided to give tournament trout fishing a try last Saturday.

Suffice it to say his debut couldn't have gone any better.

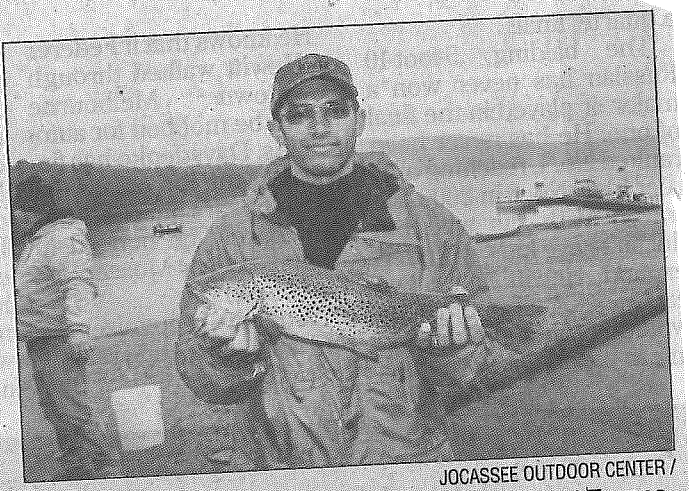
Felton's 4.66-pound brown trout took top honors in January's Lake Jocassee Trout Tournament, besting a field of 37 anglers.

"I was very pleased and blessed," Felton said. "The conditions were very good. It had been nice and cold, the trout had plenty of bait and it was an overcast day, which made for a good combination."

The combination certainly worked for Felton, who had only been fishing for about 45 minutes when his big trout swallowed a swim bait that he was fishing on a planer board in 70 feet of water.

"I knew it was a pretty good fish right away," Felton said. "When it got about 40 feet away I could see the side of it and see that it was a good-sized trout."

The ensuing fight didn't take long – five minutes at the most, and Felton kept right on fishing.



JOCASSEE OUTDOOR CENTER / Ray Felton won his first-ever Lake Jocassee Trout Tournament with this 4.66-pound brown trout.

He would go on to catch seven more fish during the day, including a 2 ½-pound largemouth bass he caught while trolling 60 feet deep, and six additional trout.

Felton kept one of the trout for dinner – a 2.2-pound brown that was stuffed to the gills with baitfish.

"That trout's stomach looked like it had swallowed a baseball," Felton said. "It had 20 inch-and-a-half shad in its belly and it still ate my spoon."

As he headed back to the main landing for the weigh-in, Felton felt good about his chances with his 4.66-pound catch – about two pounds better than his previous best catch at Jocassee – but dared not think of winning.

"Because the conditions were so good I was expecting a lot of good anglers to bring in nice fish," Felton said.

They did.

The field of 37 anglers weighed in 24 trout, with mere fractions of an ounce separating some of the catches. Runner-up Joe Owens of Easley turned in a brown weighing 4.33 pounds to edge third-place Colten Hargus of Zirconia, N.C., whose catch weighed 4.31 pounds.

Felton, a ranger at Keowee-Toxaway State Natural Area, is originally from Greenwood, where he grew up pond-fishing for bass, but has adapted quickly to the Upstate's mountain lakes.

"I fish for whatever's biting best – spotted bass on Keowee or bass or trout on Jocassee," Felton said. "I occasionally go to Hartwell for some stripers, too."

But given multiple options, Jocassee typically wins out.

"You can fish up there year-round – it doesn't matter what the weather's like," Felton said. "In fact, when the weather's awful, the fishing's pretty good. And you don't have any company out there on the lake."

And he'll probably sign up for the next trout tournament.

"Yes, if at all possible," Felton said. "For the next tournament maybe I'll get a partner and let them have a good time."

■ Reach Scott Keepfer at 298-4397