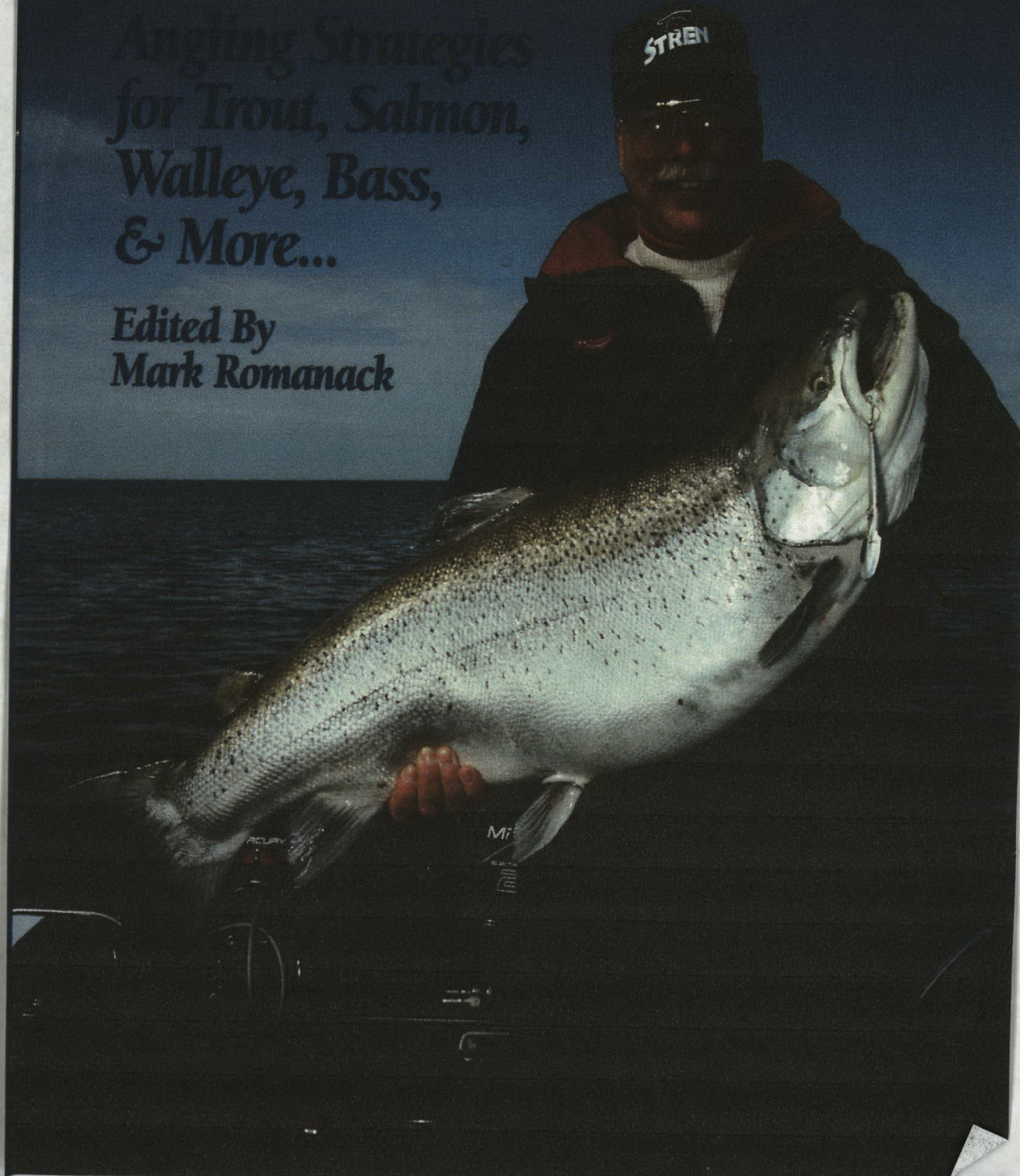


Trolling Top to Bottom

*Fishing Strategies
for Trout, Salmon,
Walleye, Bass,
& More...*

*Edited By
Mark Romanack*



Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike

Chapter 20 Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike

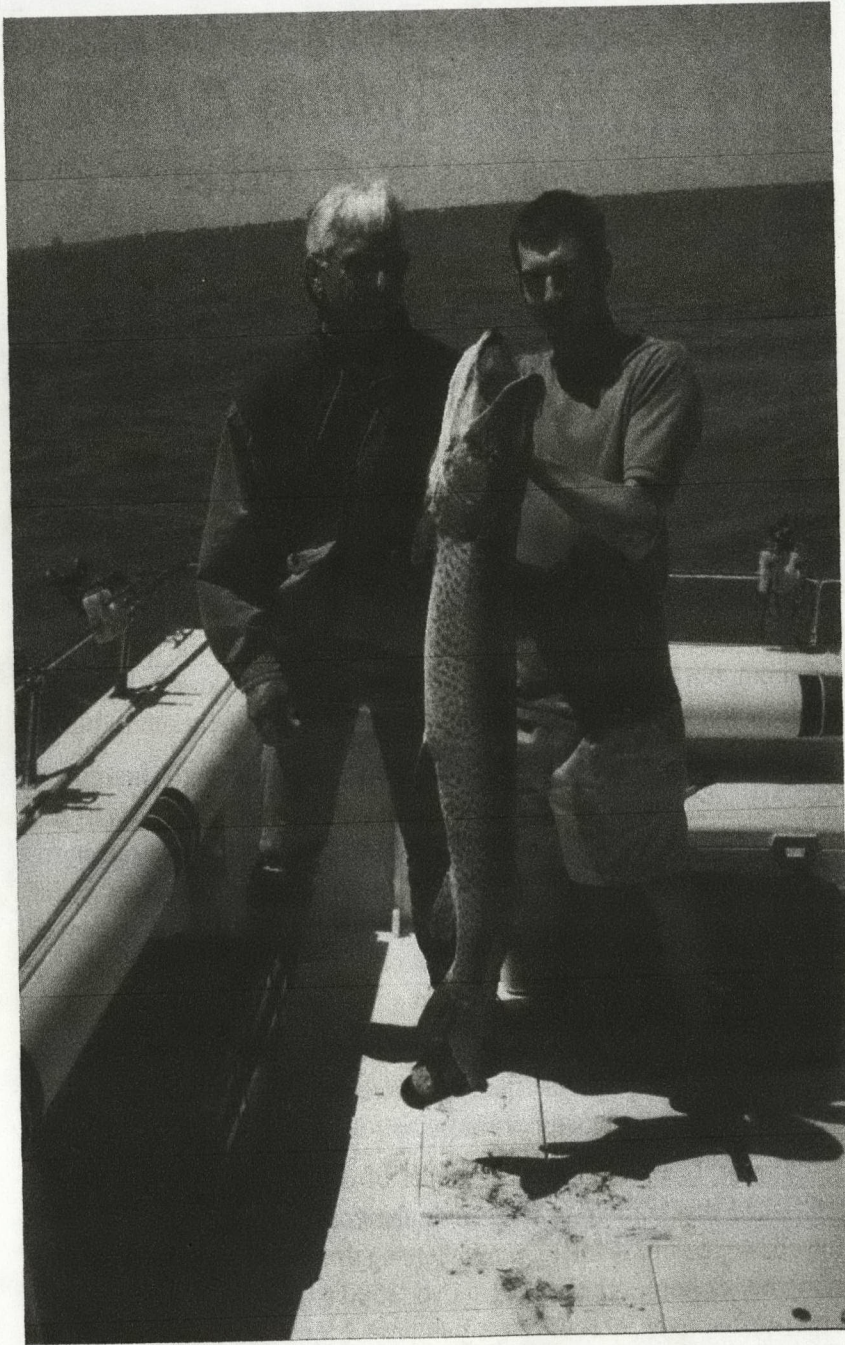
*By
Don Miller*

The sport we affectionately call fishing is made up from as much mythology as fact. This is especially true when talk turns to the muskellunge. The largest member of the *Esox* or pike family, anglers who fish for musky have been known to exaggerate a little. Surprisingly, the exaggerations aren't centered so much on the size of the fish. Musky are commonly taken in the 30 pound class and occasionally a fish upwards of 50 pounds is landed! It's a fact that musky grow big wherever you find them, but despite their often huge size these fish aren't the mystical and elusive predator of the deep that anglers make them out to be.

Musky aren't nearly as difficult to catch as you might imagine and they certainly don't have the brain power to think their way out of being captured by sportfishing pressure. The number of musky taken in most waters is low simply because the population of fish per acre of water is equally low. Natural lakes, backwaters and sluggish streams can only support a limited number of these primary predators, just like the grasslands of Africa can only support so many lions.

When musky are exposed to larger environments with ample food, cover and spawning habitat, their numbers increase dramatically. Simply put, these large waters support more and larger fish.

Lake St. Clair is a prime example of a world class musky fishery. I've fished this sprawling lake since the early 70's and have run a full time charter business for 12 years. During this period I'm comfortable in saying my customers have caught over 2500 adult musky. I'm also proud to report that over 90% of these fish have been photographed, weighed and measured for a graphite replica mount then released to fight again.



Captain Don Miller produces over 300 musky per year for his customers. His trolling tactics were developed from musky fishing legend Homer LeBlanc.

Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike

In recent years I've averaged over 300 adult fish per year. A good day of fishing on Lake St. Clair can yield as many as eight legal musky! Compared to the world famous musky waters of Northern Wisconsin, well lets just say that Lake St. Clair is in a class all itself.

Anglers who work the traditional musky waters of Wisconsin, Minnesota and southern Ontario often fish for days without even getting a follow. With fishing conditions like these, it's easy to see where the slogan of musky fishing, ie: the fish of a thousand casts, gets its roots.

For the record, virtually every fish I've landed on Lake St. Clair has been taken using trolling tactics developed by my mentor and friend the late Homer LeBlanc. Homer helped me understand the musky as a game fish and taught me how to take advantage of it's opportunistic feeding habits.

Understanding what makes a musky tick is the key to catching these awesome trophies. An adult musky is a fish with an attitude. An attitude that develops simply from being on the top of the food chain. Imagine how you might act if you were the largest fish in your environment and capable of eating almost anything that swims. Musky have no natural predators once they reach adult size. Sport fishing pressure is the only threat to musky survival.

I believe that musky have an attitude similar to that of a lion. These efficient predators are opportunistic eating what they can get and when they can get it. Usually this translates into forage that strays too close to their powerful jaws and sharp teeth. The list of foods musky eat is a long one, starting with injured, sick or dying baitfish, followed closely by other species of fish such as suckers, drum, yellow perch, bass, walleye, northern pike and even young musky. For additional protein these fish have also been known to take ducklings, young muskrats, frogs, snakes and just about anything else that ends up in the water.

I've taken some strange things out of the stomachs of musky over the years including red and white bobbers, various pieces of trash and even an adult walleye that must have weighed five or six pounds!

The startling thing about trophy musky is it's obvious they are capable of eating prey much larger than the largest fishing lures designed to catch these giants. Can you imagine trolling with a 20 inch long Believer or

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casting a two pound Dardevle. Sound crazy? Sure, but the fact remains that musky survive in part by feeding on large forage that allows them to feed less often.

The fact that musky are somewhat selective in their feeding habits is one of the major reasons I'm convinced that trolling is the most efficient means of catching these fish. Trolling, especially the speed trolling tactics developed by Homer LeBlanc, generate a reactionary type strike from musky as opposed to casting or slow trolling which allows the fish the opportunity to follow and scrutinize the baits.

I'm not saying that musky swim up and look at slow moving baits, then make a conscious decision that the bait is a fake. More likely, slow moving baits trigger a following response because the fish knows it can catch this meal any time it chooses.

Faster moving baits don't allow musky the luxury of following the bait like a wolf follows an injured deer waiting for the right moment to pounce. When a fast moving bait passes by a musky his instinctive reactions take over and the rest of the story is history.

Trolling is the only practical way to move baits at the speeds it takes to trigger a reactionary strike from large predators like musky. Sure you can cast lures and reel them in quickly to achieve the same effect, but can you imagine doing it for hour after hour, after hour?

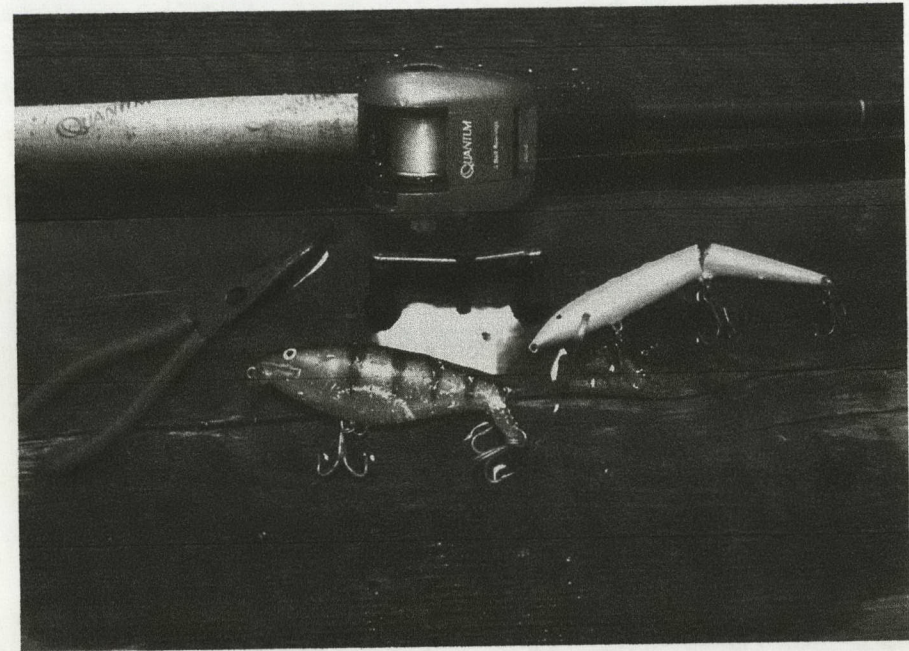
TROLLING SPEED

The specifics of Homer LeBlanc's speed trolling tactics are amazingly basic and simple. Homer believed and so do I that the key to triggering strikes in warm water fishing conditions is maintaining speeds up to six miles per hour! To a guy who's primarily fishes walleye, salmon and other species, six miles per hour may sound unrealistic, but it works.

When the season opens in June and through August I keep my boat moving at this fast pace all the time. Not only does trolling fast trigger reactionary strikes, but it also allows me to cover an enormous amount of water during the course of eight or 10 hours of fishing.

When the water begins to cool in September, October and into November, trollers are forced to slow down to some degree. Cool water slows down the activity level of all fish and the musky is no exception. Still, in cool water trolling speeds around four miles per hour seem to

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Trophy musky and northern pike are hard on fishing tackle. These lures have seen the enemy and lost.

produce the most strikes.

In the fall I also switch to larger baits. It's well documented that predator fish key on larger forage during the fall. Musky and other predators such as northern pike and walleye select larger forage during the fall period as a means of being more efficient in their feeding habits. Keying on large prey allows them to feed less often, saving valuable energy that will be needed during the lean winter months and the rigors of the spring spawning periods.

MUSKY TROLLING LURES

A multitude of lures have been designed to catch musky. Despite what you might imagine a self proclaimed musky addict's tackle box looks like, I use a rather modest selection of baits including the Believer and Musky Stalker baits by Drifter Tackle. I like Believers in the eight inch and 10 inch models in both solid and jointed versions. The Musky Stalker is a smaller bait about six inches long that is used mostly during