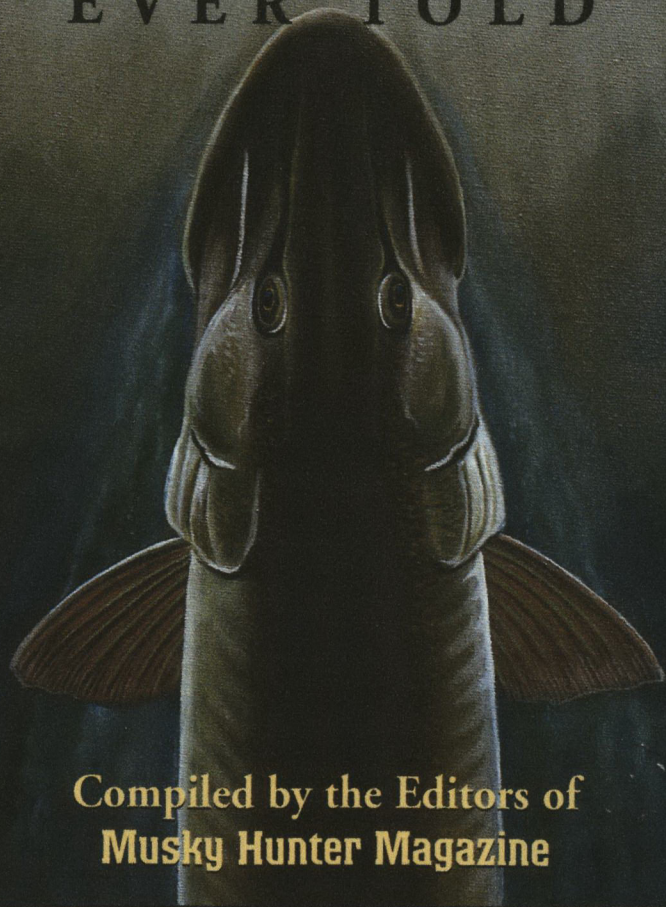


THE GREATEST

# MUSKY

# STORIES

EVER TOLD



Compiled by the Editors of  
**Musky Hunter Magazine**

## 'PUT HER BACK!'

By Captain Don Miller

The 1996 musky fishing season began on Lake St. Clair following a spring with abnormally low water temperatures and lake levels nearly 2 1/2 feet above normal. A nasty spring with concurrent cold fronts, high winds, and low air temperatures pounded the Detroit area, and I reasoned fishing would more difficult than normal.

It was mid-June and the cool spring was taking its toll. The lake had yet to give up its first big musky, and at 58 degrees the water temperature was still 4 to 5 degrees cooler than the norm for this time of the year. The weather had recently switched from winter to summer in one week's time, and I was hoping the change would finally turn the big muskies on.

My records indicated big muskies roamed in the area I was fishing and I was determined to fish hard. But catches of one to three medium-sized muskies daily seemed to be the best I could do.

Tired of struggling with smaller fish, I thought I would search my records at home for other spots to fish before I went back out again the next day. Reviewing my fishing diaries, I found records of locations where I had caught good fish in the past under similar weather conditions. I copied the GPS coordinates and checked them on a lake chart. The coordinates indicated I needed to fish closer to shore by a

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mile and a half. I recorded the numbers in a notebook, which I took down to the boat the next day.

The group I was chartering that day was very special to me. The Vollmeyers were a family of three generations: a 79-year-old grandfather, a 52-year-old father, and a 24-year-old grandson. The grandfather and father had fished with me the year before, and the eldest Vollmeyer landed a nice 47-inch musky weighing 27 pounds. He released the fish, knowing he might never catch another one as big in this life. He had undergone triple bypass heart surgery a couple of years earlier and was declared legally blind and walked with a cane. It was a privilege to guide the elder Vollmeyer to such a huge musky, and to have him back onboard my boat with his son and grandson was dear to me.

I wanted to do my best to make the trip a special day for the Vollmeyers and send them home with wonderful memories. I said a silent prayer hoping we would catch a big musky this day.

The Vollmeyers arrived at the marina where I dock my charter boat, and the grandfather immediately declared he wanted to catch a bigger musky on this trip than the one he had caught the year before.

The stage was set. We shoved off the dock under a mild high-pressure system with air temperatures hovering in the low 80s, and southwest wind at speeds of 10 to 15 mph.

I set lines with a pattern of two down rods with lures trolled five feet behind the boat, two long rods pointed straight back off the transom with lures trolled 20 feet behind the boat, and two planer board rods set in the overhead rocket launchers and armed with lures trolled 40 feet behind the boat. Not being one to give up on old things easily, I began trolling where I had left off the day before, despite findings indicating I should move closer to shore.

The air in my boat cabin filled with the usual chatter about musky fishing so far this season and how each other's family is doing. A couple hours went by without a strike, so I decided to give up the spot and troll toward the inshore area I had gleaned from my fish records.

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More St. Clair muskies bite in the afternoon than any other time of day, I thought, and anticipated results better than what I had witnessed this morning.

As I trolled closer to shore, I began to check each lure to make sure it was running properly and not fouled with weeds. I noticed the water was as blue as the coral reefs in Florida, and I could just sense something good was going to happen. I stepped back up to the helm and noted the time at 1 p.m. Then as I looked back over my shoulder at the starboard planer board line, I observed we were dragging a fish on top of the water.

The fish was a little musky which couldn't bust loose from my OR-8 heavy tension Offshore release; yet the thought of a fish caught was enough to cause me to write down the current GPS position. The Vollmeyers all joked about what a monster the musky was. My only comeback was to say: "It's a musky" and "Little ones aren't any dumber than the big ones, or we would catch little ones all day."

I checked my GPS coordinate against the coordinates of where I was trolling to and figured I was within 100 yards of last year's destination. Though small, we had caught a fish already and I could sense more would come. Quickly resetting the lure and line off the starboard planer board the little musky had bit on, I placed another perch patterned 8-inch jointed Believer lure on the port side planer board and set it the same distance back as the lure which had just picked up the little one. I looked at my watch and noted it was 1:20 p.m., when suddenly the ratchet on the Penn reel on the rod I had just set squealed with a high-pitched scream.

I grabbed the rod and could feel the heavy weight of a good-sized musky tugging on the line. It definitely was a big fish. I had started with the lure 40 feet behind the boat, and the savage runs of the fish peeled another 400 feet of line out.

The eldest Vollmeyer came to the back of the boat and I handed him the fishing rod with line screaming off the reel. I stayed with him for a few moments to make sure he had control of the rod. The musky

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was relentless, furiously peeling line from the oversized reel as the senior Vollmeyer held on for dear life. "This was the one you wanted!" I told him, as I stayed near his side, coaching him through the wrestling match he found himself in. The elder Vollmeyer said he thought the fish was stronger than the one he had last year, so I encouraged him to keep reeling on it to avoid giving the fish any slack line.

After about 10 minutes of wrestling with this fish, the eldest Vollmeyer told me he couldn't handle it anymore. I asked if he was sure and he replied the fish was more than he could handle. He passed the fishing rod to me, and as I looked at the spool of line, I noticed we were going to be "spooled off" if the fish did not start to tire pretty soon.

The eldest Vollmeyer sent his grandson to the back of the boat where I stood with the fishing rod, and I handed it to him, telling him not to quit reeling and to keep the fishing rod pointed skyward. I returned to the helm and began to maneuver the boat in position, keeping the line off the back of the boat.

This is great, I thought, as his father and grandfather encouraged the grandson to finish the job.

It seemed like 20 minutes had passed before the youngest Vollmeyer got his first look at the musky when she came out of the water about 60 yards behind the boat. She leaped skyward almost six feet into the air, twisting, turning, and shaking ferociously until her huge frame belly splashed back into the water.

"What a sight!" I declared, and I encouraged the younger Vollmeyer to not let up. I reasoned if she hadn't thrown the lure when she made that spectacular leap, she pretty much had bought the bait.

The battle for this fish was getting close to 40 minutes as I coached the youngest Vollmeyer where to stand in the boat, and grabbed the net while peering into the water to look for the fish. As it swam close, I netted this trophy for the anxious angler.

The huge musky had crushed the Believer and took every treble

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there was, but I was able to quickly remove the lure from its mouth.

As the youngest Vollmeyer posed for pictures with the musky he told his father and grandfather it was the biggest fish he had ever caught and he wanted to keep it.

As a charter captain, I maintain a strict "catch and release" policy onboard and had made up my mind he wasn't going to keep the fish, even if I had to be a bad guy. Fortunately, the grandfather spoke up and ordered his grandson to put the fish back.

The grandson, looking confused and dazed about his grandfather's command, started to explain his case. He didn't get any farther than the first word out of his mouth, when his grandfather vociferously said, "PUT HER BACK!"

I guess the youngest Vollmeyer lost his appeal to a higher court, as I removed the fish from the grandson's hands and measured the dimensions and weight of the fish. It measured 54 inches and weighed 36 pounds, 10 ounces. Not bad, I thought.

I leaned over the boat with the fish and proceeded to revive her in the water until she swam away. As the despondent grandson walked toward the front of the boat, I watched as his grandfather extended his hand to congratulate him, and explain why it was necessary to release the fish.

The eldest Vollmeyer's words were all wisdom, and I'll never forget what he said to his grandson.

"She fought gallantly and deserves to be free," he said. "Everyone should have a chance to feel what you and I felt on that fishing rod today." He went on to say it was an unselfish act and someday the grandson would appreciate releasing the fish.

I continued to check my GPS coordinates and kept working the area. The rest of the day went by fast and was action-packed with more musky catches. We finished the day with a total of 14 musky strikes, boating 11 of them. Two more fish, a 48-inch and 51-inch, were above Michigan's Master Angler size of 45 inches.

On the way home, we exchanged congratulations for a fine day of