

# Muskie Fever - Part One

by Captain Don Miller



Jack Leach of Chaska, Michigan displays a 47 inch, 27 pound St. Clair muskie taken in early August. This fish also qualified him for a master angler citation and award.

I have often wondered what it is that attracts an angler to go fishing for muskies. I'm certain that it's not the picture of a fly being cast while waiting for the distant sound of a feeding trout to kiss the fly, or a hungry bass making a slapping pass at a lure that was cast on top of the water.

For some people, maybe it's the challenge to beat the odds against them. I do know that there's something about a muskie strike that takes an angler away from everything else and reaches back into prehistoric times that relate with the ice age. When all other species of fresh water fish evolved after this time period, the muskie (muskellunge) survived through it, when razor-toothed critters were dominant kings in their own chain of life, and survival of the fittest was a way of life.

The muskie could have been made to guard the gates of hell, but somehow got trapped in the inland lakes of the world. The muskie undoubtedly has the reputation of being the CIA field agent of the fresh water fish world, being the top-of-the-line predator in fresh water, alone with no other enemies, except to themselves and mankind.

I still remember my first muskie strike in the early 1970's, while trolling in the dumping grounds in Lake St. Clair just off the mouth of the Detroit River. I was fishing with a companion in a 16-foot aluminum boat with a 20-horsepower Johnson outboard motor. This was the one fish that I had heard other anglers had given up on, or had an accidental hookup while fishing for walleye that left the angler with a broken fishing rod or an empty spool on his fishing reel, and maybe, if he was fortunate, he might retrieve the lure to take home for a conversation piece. It felt good just fishing for a fish that was capable of destroying all such mediocre tackle and lures.

The day was in the 90-degree range, and it seemed as though we had been fishing for hours, when out of nowhere one of the Penn reels started making a high-pitched scream. I hurried over and picked up the rod and couldn't believe what was happening. Every magazine article and book that I had ever read about muskies began to flash through my mind while I anticipated the arrival of this fish on the other end of my line. Deer hunters call this feeling buck fever! I cranked on the fishing reel handle until I was nearly exhausted from both the fish and the heat, when finally my friend reached over the side with a net and landed a 48-inch, 28-pound muskie. We released that fish after a brief picture-taking session and were satisfied that we had accomplished something that a lot of anglers only think of doing. The best part of it all was that we had meant to catch a muskie, and it didn't happen by accident!

Since that first one, I've landed well over 1,000 muskies. Although I still learn something every season to put in my books about muskies, I credit my success to Homer LeBlanc, the world's greatest muskie fisherman. It was his book that I read when I was an adolescent, *Muskie Fishing, Fact, Fiction, Lure and Lure*, that put me on to the technique that still produces more consistently than any other method used in modern times, with the exception of planer boards. My boat is currently docked at Homer's residence in St. Clair Shores, Michigan, and has been there for the last six years. I wish I knew half of what he forgot. Because of his age, 92, he has an advantage of 50 years experience over me. So, I'll

pass along some of the things I've learned from him and some of the things I taught myself to try and make your quest for muskies a little bit easier and, hopefully, more successful.

1. Close to 80 percent of the recorded muskies that I have boated have been taken with the lure being fished in the top ten feet of water. I've noticed a lot of anglers fishing too deep for muskies. A close look at this fish should tell you that because their eyes are located in the top of their head, they look up to see what they can feed on. Muskies have a tendency to suspend a few feet off bottom and all the way up to sunning themselves on the surface. So, my advice is to pull your bait over their heads, because you can't catch many muskies pulling your bait below their stomachs. Muskies can't see with their stomachs.

2. Don't be afraid to pull your bait too fast behind the boat. Remember, these fish explode when they strike at speeds of 25-40 mph, and your objective is to show them an image and not the whole lure. Muskies that are 46" up to 55" long are 18 to 25 years old, and didn't get that way by biting on everything that was manufactured to catch them, so you have to fool them. The mistake I see most anglers making is pulling or retrieving their baits too slowly. Most muskie anglers purchase big baits that display big hardware, and pull them too slowly, allowing muskies to see the bait too well. The most effective speed for me is 4.5 mph up to 6.5 mph. Remember this - as long as your lure is in the water and not planing on top of the water, you can't pull or retrieve your bait too fast. If they can see it, they can strike it.

3. Don't be afraid to pull or work your bait close to the boat. When muskies are in a frenzy, my most active fishing rods are the #2 and #6 rods on the Homer LeBlanc diagram, located right in the boat's prop wash, with 5 feet of line out behind the boat. A lot of anglers fish too far back behind the boat, and there's no need to. Remember, there aren't any natural predators to muskies, and they don't know what a boat is. A muskie can be very curious, and I believe that sometimes they are attracted to the sound of the engine and the bubbles in the prop wash. So, always fish a rod in there, short and tight behind the boat, which simulates a wounded baitfish, making your lure an easy prey for a muskie on the prowl.

4. The use of the Homer LeBlanc trolling method is the fishing rod setup most muskie anglers use. Please pay close attention to the illustration which is self-explanatory. One cardinal rule to follow is...the shorter the fishing rod you use, the heavier the weight you use and the closer behind the boat you pull your bait. Also, the longer the fishing rod you use, the lighter the weight you use and the farther behind the boat you pull your bait.

5. I use and recommend Penn 309 or Diawa 47H model fishing reels and fill them up with approximately 200-250 yards of 40-pound Trilene XT monofilament fishing line. Although this seems like a lot of line, I can recall several experiences when I was glad I had it, as some of these heavyweights stripped out almost a whole spool before I started to retrieve some line back on my reel.

6. Use heavy graphite fishing or fiberglass rods and always point your fishing rods straight out the side of your boat with the tips pointed slightly toward the water. The only exception is the #2 and #6 rods in the diagram which are pointed straight down at the water. This will allow you to be more versatile in your setup and have greater hooking power as opposed to the rod tips being up in the air. I also recommend the salty Downeast S-10 type rod holder if you can buy it. It clamps to the railing or any piece of structure on your boat which has a ledge. When I first started out, I used a 2x4 and mounted it in the oar locks on a small boat with loosely tightened bolts; then I mounted the rod holders to the 2x4. It may not have been pretty, but it worked and I caught a lot of fish with that first simple set.

7. Don't use steel leaders or any of that plastic-coated stuff - it's junk! I believe muskies see the wire or plastic too well and you won't get as many strikes by using it. I recommend and use Trilene 100-pound test, big game leader material and hand tie my own. All of my leaders are cut in 4-6 foot lengths and tied off at each end with a Trilene heavy-duty cross-lock ball bearing snap swivel of 150-pound test. At the end of your fishing line, off your reel, tie on another 150-pound test cross-lock snap swivel. In between your fishing line and your leader is where you connect the "in-line" weight. Use the lead weights with a brass "O" ring at each end, and place your lure at the far end. One last thing...don't forget to preset your fishing reel's drag so the line can go out when extra weight hits it. If you don't, you may not have a fishing rod to use once these fresh water wolves decide to take on your lure.

In part two I'll discuss size, action and types of lures that produce best for me on Lake St. Clair, as well as how water clarity affects fishing and the best structure and cover to search for muskies. Hopefully by sharing these few starter tips, you'll get started in the right direction with proper techniques and the proper rigging when your moment of being successful finally arrives. By the way, deer hunters catch buck fever, and anglers get some of the same symptoms once they hook up with muskies. I call it "Muskie Fever," but watch out - once you've been bitten, all other fish strangely become "Just Bait."

If you have questions or would like some information on charters, please feel free to call me at (313) 429-9551. Good luck and good fishing!