

# Muskie Fever - Part Four - The Conclusion

by Tom Irwin

Muskie fishing has always intrigued me. After all, in the bodies of water they inhabit they are at the very top of the food chain. The ultimate freshwater predator. Because of this I've always figured that my career as a freshwater fisherman would not be complete without landing at least one muskie deemed keeper size.

Upon talking to and reading Don Miller's articles: *Muskie Fever - Part One*, *- Part Two* and *- Part Three*, I realized I finally had my chance to go head-to-head with a muskie in one of the most famous muskie lakes of all, Lake St. Clair.

The plans were made, the date was set and we were on our way! Accompanying me was *Sportsman's Corner* publisher Wayne Kamp (he pulled rank saying that as long as this was a business trip he'd better come along and take care of business), and long-time fishing partner Brian Hughes (he heard we were going muskie fishing and cashed in a few fishing trip debts that we owed him).

On the long drive to the St. Clair Shores area to meet Don, the inevitable question arose: since we will be trolling multiple lines as explained in Don's previous articles, who would get first shot at a St. Clair Muskie? I quickly resolved this issue by offering Brian (the question asker) the first shot and Wayne the second. Now, this might seem mighty generous but in reality three has always been my lucky number and after watching those two do battle I figured I'd know better what to expect and therefore be less likely to let a big muskie get the best of me.

We met Don at the residence of legendary muskie fisherman Homer LeBlanc. At ninety-three years of age, Homer had become rather slow of limb but still had the wit of a man one-quarter his age. Don Miller has the extreme good fortune of being a Homer LeBlanc protégé. In Homer's words, "I taught him everything I know about muskie fishing and he hasn't taught me a thing. Therefore he knows more about it than I do."

After a lengthy interview with Homer (to be published in *Sportsman's Corner* in the summer of 1994) and an impressive tour of his basement, complete with thousands of Homer's hand-made muskie lures, awards and muskie photos, we headed out back to board Don's 22-foot Starcraft muskie boat. As we got underway, Homer LeBlanc, the man who's caught more muskies than anyone, yelled, "fish hard men, fish hard."

Lake St. Clair is a huge body of water. Some call it the sixth Great Lake. As we

throttled up in the open water of St. Clair, Don pointed across open water toward the Canadian side, which wasn't visible in the haze, explaining that we would start out fishing in Canadian water. This was the reason we had to purchase Canadian licenses. "For the past two weeks or so the Canadian water has been more productive. I hope we can spend some time over there before it gets too rough," Don remarked. The forecast called for strong winds to pick up by early afternoon blowing into the Canadian shoreline. Lake St. Clair can get rough in a hurry.

At 10:30 a.m. Don and his first mate, Larry Ossenmacher, began to deploy lines. There was no mistaking them for amateurs. In less than five minutes they had all six lines set and the hunt was on. Being a walleye fisherman I was truly amazed at the trolling pattern we were using. Our trolling speed was 5.5 to 6 mph. All the lures were from 8 to 10 inches in length and most were Believers of assorted colors. Line wise Don runs 40 lb. Trilene XT main lines with a 5 foot leader of 100 lb. Berkley Big Game. What amazed me the most was how close they ran the lures to the boat. The two rods run closest to the boat (the down rods) were just 4-1/2 feet long and were pointed directly down toward the prop wash. On the business end of these rods were 8-inch jointed Believers with 12 ounces of lead 4 to 5 feet in front of them. These lures were run no more than 15 feet from the rod tip to the lure. In fact, by standing in the back of the boat you could clearly make out these two lures swimming just a few feet down in the prop wash. The next rods set were the out rods. These rods were 10 feet in length with plenty of backbone. These were set out from the boat with 8 ounces of weight and about 30 feet of line out. The last set of rods were run off double ski redwood planerboards and were connected to the line with heavy duty Offshore Planer Board Releases. These lures were weighted with 4 ounces of lead and were set 40 feet behind the board. Once the lines were set they had to continually be checked for weeds that would be picked up on the surface and slide down to the weight or lure.

About 11:30 the wind began to pick up as forecasted and Don remarked that if it didn't go down soon we'd have to make for the U.S. shoreline. The seas continued to increase and just a few minutes before 12:30 we heard a loud twanging, snapping noise, almost like a guitar string that had been plucked until it broke, and then the clicking

sound of the big Penn reel as it released drag. Don yelled, "fish" and Brian raced for the rod...the fight was on!

All other lines were removed from the water and the boat was slowed to a crawl as Brian played tug of war with the big fish. For what seemed like 20 minutes Brian made no headway on the big fish. Then very slowly just one or two feet at a time he began to regain line. After about 25 minutes we got our first look at the fish who by now had gained all of Brian's respect. A head that looked to be the size of a small shovel appeared about 20 yards off the stern of the boat as if the fish wanted to get a look at his enemy. Then the head began to shake violently from side to side as the great tail of the fish propelled it skyward four feet or more into the air, cartwheeling and landing with a huge splash back into the water. A few more strong runs and the fish tired and came begrudgingly to the net.

The fish measured 43 inches and Don estimated him at about 24 pounds. After a quick photo shoot the fish was released back to Lake St. Clair no worse for wear and I believe leaving Brian more worn out than he. Brian's fish came in 19 feet of water just east of Bell River, Ontario, taking an 8-inch jointed Believer, dark green frog in color, off the planer board.

Lines were quickly reset and the waves continued to get larger. We circled the same area where we had hooked the fish and about a half-hour later had another strong strike on the planer board. However, this fish did not get good hooks and pulled free before Wayne got to the rod. By now we were in four foot seas making it impossible to troll effectively. We pulled lines and headed for the American side where Don admitted the fishing had been slow. Still, we were forced to play the cards we were dealt so we trolled the American side for a couple more hours and then due to tornado warnings called it a day.

Known as the fish of 10,000 casts and the hardest of all freshwater fish to catch consistently, I was amazed that Don felt bad for getting blown off the fish after catching just one. Any muskie guide anywhere else but Lake St. Clair would be thrilled to put one twenty-plus pounder in the boat on a daily basis. Besides Wayne and I now have a reason to go back fishing with Don on Lake St. Clair. Like I said, no ones fishing career should be complete with out catching at least one muskie and Wayne and I aren't even close to retirement.

If you're interested in fishing with Don or just want to ask him some questions, give him a call at (313) 429-9551. ☐