

# OUTDOORS



Don Miller of Saline shows off a 48-inch, 27-pound muskie taken recently from the waters of Lake St. Clair.

## A new love

### *Muskie fever bites another avid outdoorsman*

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Outdoors Writer

At first I thought the strange buzzing was an insect caught somewhere in the bimini top of Captain Don Miller's 22-foot Starcraft boat, the Muskie Hunter.

But when Don yelled, "Fish on!" I realized that on their initial run big muskies can pull line out fast enough to make Japanese-manufactured reels sound as if they are speaking Japanese.

One of the planer board rods had received a solid strike, and the rod and reel was the source of the buzzing racket. Miller handed the rod down to me, and my first encounter with a trophy Lake St. Clair musky was about to begin.

As I held the rod and tried to retrieve line, my 40-plus years of angling experience told me this particular fish was something special.

There are few freshwater fish that can raise an angler's hackle faster than the MUSKIE.

To the fishing public, muskies are more legend than biological substance, generally viewed as tackle-busting devils not regularly sought out by the masses. In fact, not many anglers ever get to see a live muskie much less hook and land one. But to the few fishermen that restrict their angling solely to the taking of these freshwater wolves, muskies are far more than "sport" fishing or recreation.

I HAVE never seen anyone with "gold fever" but "muskie fever" must rank right up there with it. There's something about these creatures of the weedline and shallows, that generates an intense urge for some men to catch one.

Last week, I was in the company of just such a man, Captain Don Miller, who runs Miller's Muskies, a sport fishing charter on Lake St. Clair.

Captain Don Miller has made muskie fishing into a lifestyle. He eats and sleeps muskies. He talks about sessions with famous Lake St. Clair muskie guides like Homer LeBlanc, Hank Bradley and John Miner the same way other men might discuss religious leaders, presidents or the stock market.

Sports nuts have nothing on Don when it comes to compiling stats. He can tell you where, when, how and the size of each and every muskie he has ever boated. Included in his stats are weather conditions, water temperatures, trolling speed and other details. He is seriously considering the purchase of a new computer to organize the data he has collected over the seasons.

For nearly 10 years, Miller had the famous Homer LeBlanc as almost his personal muskie mentor. LeBlanc died last year, but Miller still keeps his boat at the LeBlanc home in St. Clair Shores.

ABOARD THE boat with us that day was Bill Hoch, of Leamington, Ontario, another of Miller's muskie connections. Hoch worked as one of the late John Miner's charter captains back in the 1970s and has a wealth of knowledge gleaned after many years in the Lake St. Clair muskie wars.

"Reel, Mike, reel," became the constant chant from Miller as for about 10 minutes I pretended to be having some effect on the muskie I was attached to. The combination of short stiff rod, 50-pound, no stretch line, a left wrist starting to cave in as arthritis applied its nasty bite to the joint and a huge muskie was taking its toll.

I could see the big fish about 30 feet behind the boat, swimming along the top of the water, in the opposite direction of our troll.

You don't pump the rod with muskies the way you do on other big fish like salmon or pike. To keep maximum pressure on the fish, the angler is instructed to hold the rod at about a 45 degree angle and simply wind the reel handle. To someone with arthritis in the wrist, its like lighting your watch band on fire.

WHEN THE fish was close to the boat, and we could see it was well hooked and about played out, I

turned the rod over to Miller. He horsed the big fish to the net while I looked for a knife with which to cut off my left hand with.

When the fish was unhooked, weighed and measured I quickly shot some photos. Our big concern was to return the fish as quickly as possible with the least amount of stress. That muskie was 48 inches long and weighed almost 30 pounds, but there are lots of fish that size in Lake St. Clair today, the result of prudent catch and release angling over the last 10 years.

Miller is gaining quite a reputation on Lake St. Clair. The muskie he boated last Sunday was the 137th of the season for Don Miller. He has put a muskie in the boat every day he has fished since the season began in June, with his best day being a run of seven straight fish one beautiful summer day.

Miller prides himself as much on the successful release of big muskies as he does catching them. His rule is that in order to be kept, a muskie must be over 45 inches and weigh at least 20 pounds. His boat takes lots of potential keepers every summer, but most anglers choose to catch, photograph and release their fish, just as we did that 48-incher last Sunday.