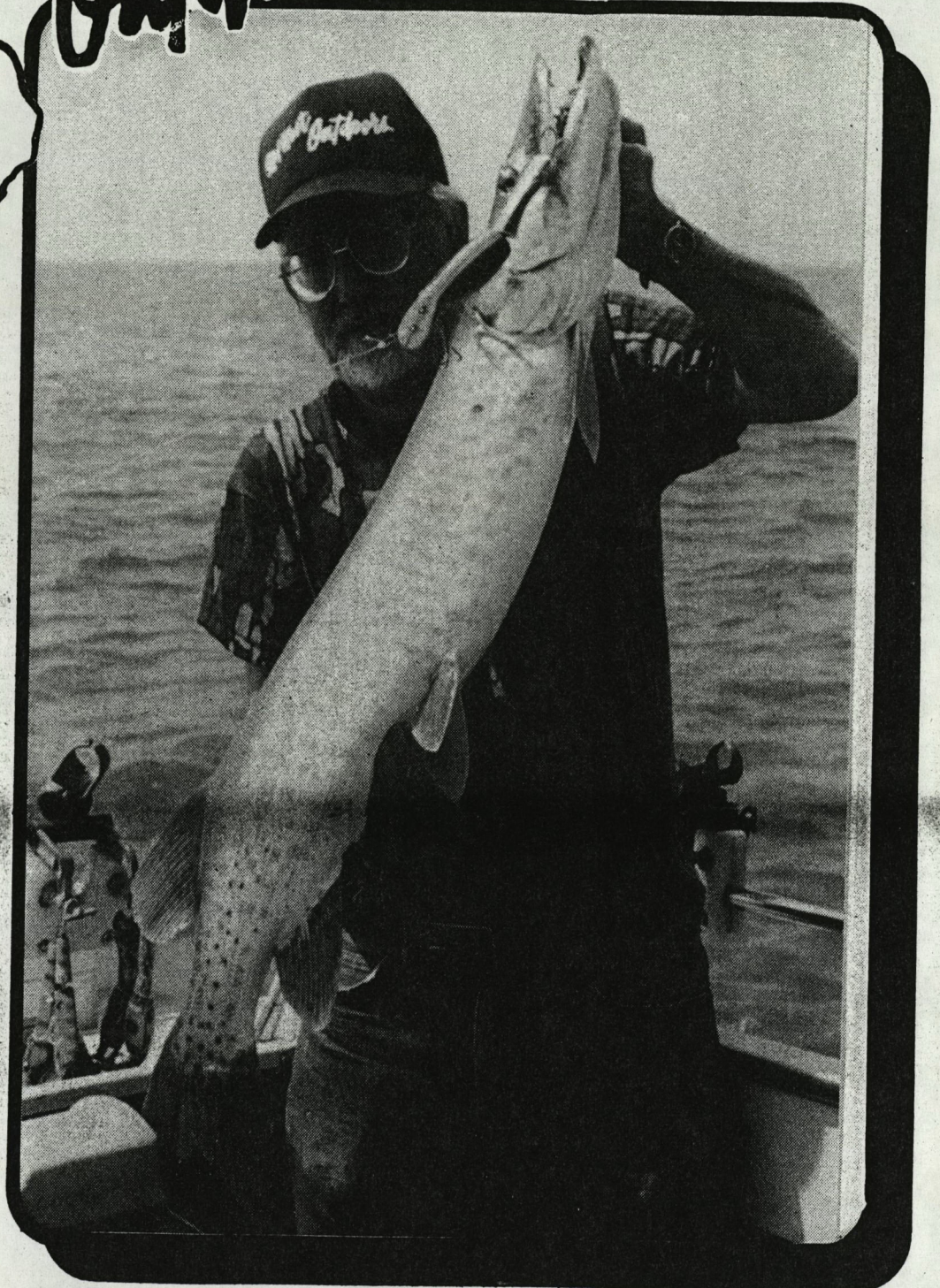


November, 1994

Mid West Outdoors

Michigan Section



George Richey with a 44-inch, 22-pound muskie taken on a rainbow-colored Believer. This pretty fish was released. See Georg's story on page 122.

Exciting Muskie Fishing On Lake St. Clair

BY GEORGE RICHEY

A person would have to be both blind and deaf to not notice the rod jerking in the Down Easter rod holder, or to not hear the chatter from the Penn reel as line was being pulled off in line-grabbing amounts. I got to the rod and then had a hard time getting it out of the rod holder. A heavy pull on the other end told me I was tied to an angry muskie. We had just been setting lines and had just begun fishing.

Leonard "Butch" Thompson of Honor and I were trolling on Lake St. Clair with Captain Don Miller, who runs his Musky Hunter charter boat for the big, black-spotted, Great Lakes muskie, as well as for walleye. Don had learned much of his muskie knowledge from famed Homer LeBlanc. LeBlanc developed the trolling system we were using, where rods are positioned on the boat to allow the lures to run right in the prop wash off the corner of the boat. This is a very unique system and, as our day would indicate, it's also productive. Most of our trolling took place over 17- to 18-foot of water with weed growth on the bottom.

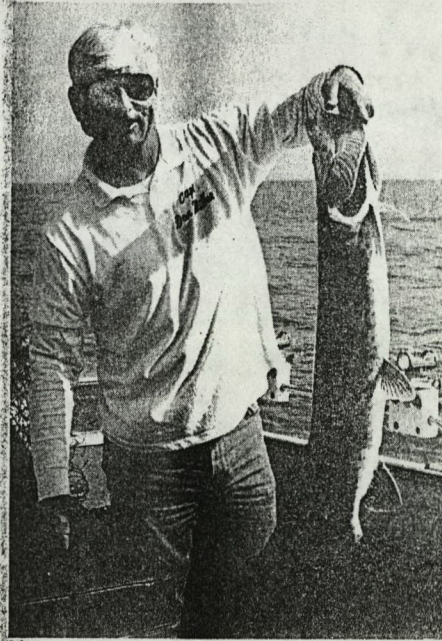
The muskie on my line hit just five feet off the corner of the boat, but now it didn't want to come towards the boat. Leaning on the fish, I finally wore it down. I led in the muskie next to the boat so Don could extract the hooks from the bass-colored Believer from the jaw of the black-spotted fish. My muskie was about four inches short of the 42-inch minimum, so I took a couple of quick photos of Don with my fish, and then he returned the fish to Lake St. Clair to continue growing.

A 38- or 39-inch fish looks pretty big, but there are lots of muskie in this size range being caught. This tends to indicate good growth, thanks to a good catch-and-release ethic and the 42-inch minimum on both Michigan and Canadian waters. We'd already landed a fish and hadn't gotten all the lines set yet. Our muskie-catching opportunities were looking good!

Our captain told us about the Homer LeBlanc trolling system as we ran at five miles per hour in search of another muskie. "Homer figured out the muskie and determined these big fish are fearless. Running the baits close behind the boat works the best—these were solid words of wisdom from the man called Mr. Muskie—Homer LeBlanc," said our 40-year-old, gray-haired charter captain.

About the only thing we were doing different that Homer LeBlanc didn't do was run a planer board out on each side. We had two down rods with the lures running tight off the corner of the boat, and two rods with the lures running about 25 feet behind the boat. The rod placement, with varying amounts of lead weight and distances behind the boat, allowed us to run four lines and never tangle—and, take muskie.

Butch was up next, when a black-spotted muskie slammed a white perch Mason plug that was also run on a down rod next to the corner of the boat. The reel was screaming, and the rod was trying to jerk out of the rod holder. Butch managed to



Left, Leonard "Butch" Thompson of Honor, Mich., with a 38-inch muskie—his first. Right, Captain Don Miller holding a 38-inch muskie soon to be gently released.

muscle the rod out and put the pressure on the muskie. When I heard the reel begin to give line, I looked over to the corner of the boat, and the muskie actually came up to the surface a foot off the corner of the boat.

"It feels good. I don't know if it's a legal fish or not, but we'll see," said the postmaster from Honor. Gradually, he wore down the muskie and led it in to where Don could ease out the hooks. I took a quick photo of Butch with his first muskie, and this fish was released. It missed the minimum size by about four inches. It pays to ease out the hooks and get the fish back to the water in a hurry.

We had two muskie landed out of two strikes, and in less than an hour! We got the rods set again and continued cruising Lake St. Clair in search of a legal-sized muskie or a wall hanger to take home. I asked Don how his year has been so far. He replied, "So far in 1994, we've landed 80 muskie. One 53-inch muskie was landed, and four muskie over 50 inches have been landed (with one 50-inch fish released), and a 48-inch fish released. It appears I'll pass my 1993's totals when we landed 103 muskie out of 159 fish on," said our personable charter skipper.

"Homer LeBlanc knew Lake St. Clair like the back of his hand. You could take him anywhere on the lake, and he could tell you how deep the water was and if there were any weeds or not; he didn't need GPS or Loran," said Don Miller, talking of his instructor and good friend who passed away in late 1993. Homer LeBlanc was a legend, a Legendary Guide and Honorary Member of the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame as well as in the National Fishing Lure Collectors Club.

Homer originated a lure called the 'swim Whizz, which the Believer lure was patterned after. He also made a spoon called the Swim Zag and the B Spinner. Homer LeBlanc caught a bunch of muskie over the years. It's been said that our skipper's instructor had caught some 3,000 muskie or more in his lifetime. It was obvious that Don Miller learned, and learned well, from his mentor.

Suddenly, the down rod began shrieking as a good-sized muskie was aking line in short spurts. When I rapped the rod, I looked backward and saw a good muskie boil on the surface. Keeping a tight line on the muskie was my first priority, and to ake my time until Don cleared the other lines. The fish was strong, pulling hard, and slashing the surface to a froth, and then diving oward bottom 17 feet down. I knew hat if this fish was landed, it would e my first legal-sized muskie.

Don was busy pulling in lines, and had my hands full with the scrappy muskie. Butch was on the wheel teering us away from the fish until I tired. The fish pulled hard, wallowed a lot on top, and took line a number of times from the reel with a uick dash away from the boat. After hearty 15-minute struggle, I managed to work in the tired fish next to the Musky Hunter so Don could unhook it.

I'd told Don that I wasn't keeping any fish unless it was a wall hanger trophy. Don asked if I wanted a photo of my first legal muskie. "You bet!" I replied. I quickly posed with the 44-

inch muskie, and Butch took a couple of quick pictures before I eased the fish over the side. With a powerful swipe of its tail, it dove for the depths. Perhaps next year I'll catch another, and it may be the size I want for a mount.

Captain Don Miller guessed my fish to be 22 pounds. What a beautiful fish! He told me, "I don't let anyone keep a fish less than 45 inches or under 20 pounds." Muskie can often live up to 30 or 35 years and keep putting on weight. This fish hit the down rod off the corner of the boat on a rainbow-colored Believer, just as the previous two fish.

Don is different than many muskie skippers. He shows you how to set lines, and then allows clients to help him. "This really gets the customers involved, and they learn from the trip. I've seen many of my clients back out on the lake later, practicing what they learned on a trip with me," said Miller. We were heading toward shore when the last fish hit on a bass-colored Believer running about 25 feet behind the boat.

Butch skillfully played the 36-inch muskie, and we managed to get a quick photo of this incredibly pretty, black-spotted muskie, and then he returned it to Lake St. Clair. We had four hits, and we landed four muskie. This was my best muskie trip yet. I learned a lot from Don, and we had a ball with him. He has a great sense of humor and is very reverent when talking about his teacher and friend, Homer LeBlanc.

For an exciting muskie trip with one of the top muskie guides in the country, contact Captain Don Miller, 471 Canterbury Street, Saline, MI 48176, or call 313-429-9551. Presently, a four-person charter costs about \$350. If you want to see big fish and possibly land one as well, this is a must trip to make!

MidWest Outdoors