



Charter boat Captain Don Miller of Saline shows off a Lake St. Clair muskie.

NEWS BUREAU PHOTO
BOB GWIDZ

Muscling in muskies makes for a midsummer day's delight

By BOB GWIDZ

ANN ARBOR NEWS BUREAU

ST. CLAIR SHORES — We'd been trolling for almost three hours without a strike when Don Miller decided it was time for a change.

He rattled around in one of his tackle boxes and pulled out the ugliest, most beat-up, tooth-marked old plug he could find. The plug was so chewed up, one large gap was filled with automotive body putty and other areas were covered with epoxy.

It was an old jointed Believer — 17 years old, Miller said — in the Nine-Dollar Bass finish. The finish — it looks sort of like a smallmouth bass — was custom painted by an old-timer and at a time when Believers cost \$3-4, these cost \$9. Hence, Nine Dollar Bass.

At any rate, Miller attached the plug to one of the lines running off the planer boards and kicked the boat into gear, trolling at about 5 mph.

"I was taught to believe that these fish are hard to fool," said Miller, who spent many years under the tutelage of the late, great Homer LeBlanc. "Pull your bait too slow behind the boat, they see it and it looks phony. You pull it real fast to trigger a reactive strike — you show the fish an image, not a lure.

"A muskie can strike at 25 to 40 miles an hour. As long as your bait's in the water, not planing and skipping out, then they can hit it."

Apparently, the old Nine Dollar

Bass was what was prescribed. Not five minutes later, the sound of line zinging off a reel indicated a fish was on.

It was my turn at the rod and as I reeled, I felt the fish swimming toward me. No big whoop. I gained ground. But somewhere along the line, maybe 20 feet from the boat or so, the critter changed its mind and decided to go in the other direction.

Line started peeling off the reel like hair off a hippie at a Marine Corps barber shop. This is what muskie fishing is supposed to be about. Eventually, however, the fish tired and Miller netted the brute.

It was a beauty; Miller hooked it to a digital scale — 25 pounds even — and asked if I wanted to mount it. Nope. Let it go. Miller held the fish in the water for a couple of moments and then turned it loose. It slowly swam away.

It was the second fish of the day, taken after Miller had not only bet on his good-luck bait, but had moved us into 16 feet of water, fairly shallow stuff for July muskie fishing. Our first fish, a 10-pounder with a swollen belly that looked like it contained a downrigger weight, hit around 10:30 in 18 feet.

That was a bonus fish.

"You catch more muskies from 11 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon than any other time," Miller said.

Muskie fishing may be heat-of-the-day fishing, but this wasn't your typical July day. It was mostly overcast and the stiff wind had us

rockin' and rollin' like Jerry Lee Lewis all day. It never really warmed up.

But the fishing did. Less than a half hour later, we had a strike but didn't connect. Twenty minutes later we caught another.

That was it for the day; the sky took on an ominous cast, it started to rain, so we cleared lines and beat it back to shore before the thunder-boomers caught up with us.

Still we went three for four, which is pretty fair muskie fishing in anybody's book.

But that's the way it's been this year.

"This is my best year yet," said the 40-year-old charterboat skipper. "I haven't been skunked this year."

Not that it won't happen. Odds are good that Miller will take a donut sooner or later. That's the way it is with muskies. Still, things had gone more or less according to plan with all three fish hitting baits sporting natural finishes. That seems to be one of the keys to catching muskies.

"It's always been that way," said Miller, who trolled with lures featuring bass, pike, perch and frog finishes most of the day. "There are exotics and psychedelics out there to use, but you're better off staying with the naturalistic stuff — stuff that lives in the lake and swims in the lake and the fish are used to seeing."

Like Nine Dollar Bass.

To book Miller, call (313) 429-9551.