

Miller carries on tradition of muskie master

On Lake St. Clair, most experienced muskie fishermen readily acknowledge the late Homer Le Blanc as the dean of muskie fishing.

Over the years, the many anglers who fished with the Michigan native benefited from his expertise. They caught fish, too. Big fish, and lots of them.



Dan Watkin

Le Blanc, who died last year at age 92, had that knack that few fishermen have. He had almost a sixth sense that told him where the fish would be, and what it would take to catch them. His technique and tackle were often considered ridiculous by those uninitiated to the Le Blanc way of fishing for muskie. More naive, yet somewhat more

polite neophytes considered the crusty old-timer's approach to catching muskie illogical.

In the end, neither group could refute the his success. Le Blanc could produce hookups with big fish when practically everyone else on the lake was producing zeros.

Le Blanc's repeated successes could be attributed to hard work and an ability to remember the most minute details. The muskie legend always knew where he was on the lake at all times, and remembered what he was doing when he picked up a fish.

Le Blanc was one of the first anglers in the history of modern day angling to realize that the ability to repeat, when it came to trolling, was one of the keys to successful

OUTDOORS



fishing. Homer Le Blanc had many admirers, countless acquaintances but, I expect, few confidants.

One of the few people who knew Le Blanc well is Don Miller, an expert muskie angler in his own right. Don fishes out of St. Clair Shores, Mich., and was a regular fishing companion of Le Blanc's for more than 10 years.

Much of what Miller does on the water are tricks of the trade he learned from years angling with Le Blanc.

Last weekend, I was privileged to share some time with Don aboard his boat, thanks to some verbal maneuvering by Bob Tessier.

The first thing that caught my attention once we had pulled out of the harbor at Belle River was how well organized Miller kept his boat.

Every item of equipment, from rods to planer boards, had its specified storage site. This kind of organization made for quick rigging once we had reached the spot where Don had decided to fish.

SINCE THERE WERE six anglers aboard Don's boat that day, six rods were rigged and set out.

Two lines, one each to port and starboard, were deployed on short leads to either side of the boat on planer boards. Two short rods were affixed firmly in vertical positions, one on each side of the boat. These rods supported one-pound round weights a foot or

so from the ends. Short leads ran from the round weights, so that the baits they pulled fished off either corner of the stern of the boat.

Two of the remaining four rods were set firmly in rod holders and pulled baits that ran literally in the prop wash of his Mer-cruiser Outdrive. The remaining two rods ran lures on slightly longer leads, but still worked the turbulent water created by the motors behind the boat.

Miller varied his trolling speed little. Most of the time we were trolling at a respectable five to five-and-a-half m.p.h. clip. For a wall-eye troller like myself, it felt like we were travelling at near water-skiing speed. But the speed, said Don, was required to optimize plug action and provoke strikes.

MILLER IS VERY SPECIFIC about setting up each and every lure he fishes. Knots and leaders (100-pound test monofilament line works best) were carefully examined. Lead lengths were set at very specific distances, and drags on reels were checked several times before the rods were finally placed in their holders.

Initial trolling passes usually involve a variety of different colored baits being fished, Miller said.

Light-colored baits, dark baits with light-colored bottoms, and frog finishes were all colors we tried over the course of my outing with Miller.

Over the years, Don said, he's noticed on any given day, muskies will hit one particular colored bait preferentially, no matter where it is trolled in the scheme of things. On days such as these, all other colors seem to be totally ignored.

Once our lines had been set, the waiting game began. All lines were regularly

checked to make sure they were free of weeds.

Of all the fish finding gear Miller had on his boat, he relied on his Loran and depth finder the most.

During the 2 1/2 hours I spent with Don, he didn't even turn on his fish finder. On this particular day, water depth and weed bed location were more important to Miller than other factors that could have influenced where the fish were.

Our trolling pattern was pretty much confined to a 3/4-mile radius from the point where we had set our first line.

We had only been fishing 45 minutes when the first muskie hit. A respectable fish, the dark-backed beauty smashed a perch back, yellow bellied believer that had been trolling farthest back on the port side of the prop wash.

After battling the brute to boat side, Don leaned over the side of the boat and deftly removed the trebles from the fish's mouth with a long-nosed pair of pliers. In less than a second, the prize sank into the safety of the weed beds below.

A half hour later, another fish, much larger than the first, blasted the lure being trolled behind the port side planer board. This fish, too, had fallen prey to a perch on yellow bellied believer.

UNLIKE HIS PREDECESSOR, this muskie took to the sky and with one defiant shake of its head, tossed the lure back at the boat. Such is muskie fishing.

Miller believes muskie angling on St. Clair has never been better. More people are catching fish, he said. Best of all, the season's very best muskie fishing is just starting. From now until winter's freeze, expect some big fish to be caught.



Frank Simms and John Simms, both of Dearborn, Mich., show muskies they caught while fishing with Don Miller.