

# Lake St. Clair: Place to be for muskie

**B**ELLE RIVER, Ontario — Maybe Rod Rogas should think about skipping next year's John Miner Memorial Tournament.

Last year, a muskellunge registered its disapproval at being caught by biting him and leaving a seven-stitch wound in his hand.

This year, two anglers on Rogas' boat were playing muskies, and when he leaned over to net the first half of the doubleheader the eight-inch Wiley lure pulled out of the muskie's mouth and snapped back into his face so hard it almost knocked him down.

Lynn Capps, another charter skipper who was fishing with Rogas on a busman's holiday, took one look and said, "Okay, Horror. We're going to the hospital." When Rogas asked why, Capps answered, "Because you've got a Wiley stuck in your jaw."

It was only then that Rogas realized

the big lure was semi-permanently fastened to his chin via two points of a sharp, stout treble hook.

"It hit me so hard it almost knocked my teeth out," Rogas said. "But we were lucky. We got a nice doctor to come down to his office, and he put a little cut in my chin and got the hook out. Then we went back out fishing."

Fifty-seven boats carrying about 250 anglers paid \$150 each to enter last weekend's tournament, which offered a top prize of \$2,500 Canadian for the biggest fish.

Bob Tessier, owner of the R&D Tackle Shop in Belle River and event organizer, said that with the minimum entry level raised to 45 inches this year, anglers killed only five fish and released virtually all of the rest of the 400 muskellunge caught in the two-day event.

"Most of the fish they caught were babies (under 24 inches)," Tessier said. "When the wind changed it blew a lot of loose weeds into the places where most of the boats thought the big muskies were, and the weeds were so bad they couldn't troll there. But seeing those baby fish should make everybody feel great, because that's the future of muskie fishing in Lake St. Clair."

I fished on Don Miller's 29-foot Baja, Muskie Hunter, along with Dar-

lene Berardo and Lenny Ossenmacher.

Muskie Hunter boated and released 17 the first day, the biggest a 16-pounder, but the score was zilch on the second.

Miller said Berardo was antsy because lines weren't snapping out of the releases every 15 minutes. The first time she fished with Miller she caught her first muskie — a 45-inch that is a trophy by any standard — and he says she expects something similar every trip.

"I don't know anything about fishing," Berardo said. "I just knew I didn't want to have to touch worms. They told me to pick out a lure that had a lot of tooth marks on it. I thought they were kidding, but I picked one and when I reeled in the fish and first saw it I thought I had a shark."

Berardo said that when another charter captain asked her what lure she used, "I told him. I saw Don's face and realized I'd done something wrong. But nobody told me you were supposed to lie about it."

Miller said, "Of course you lie! This is fishing. If somebody asked me where I caught a fish, I'd tell him a place 180 degrees away. And if you find a lure that works, everybody else will find out about it soon enough without help from you."

This year's John Miner Tourna-

ment was won by Mike Momany of Harrison Township, who landed a 48½-inch muskie that went 26.64 pounds fishing aboard Gotcha.

Greg Leclerc of Stony Point, Ontario, was second with a 48-inch that weighed 26.36 aboard Rod Wrestler, and Stephen Van Assche of Mt. Clemens was third with a 48½-inch that weighed 26.34 on Bushwhacker.

Momany was fishing off St. Luke's about five miles east of where we fished the second day, and he said there were a lot fewer weeds in the water. His boat landed 15 fish in two days, but they averaged considerably larger than most of the fish landed by other boats.

"I always start out with perch and frog colors on most of the lines," Momany said. "But I try other patterns, too, and once I find a color is working, I stick with it. This weekend, the colors that worked best were browns and golds, basically carp and bass colors. Pike scales worked, too."

That makes sense. With the rapidly clearing waters of Lake St. Clair (largely due to zebra mussel activity), small-mouth bass and pike populations have increased dramatically, and the muskies have undoubtedly keyed on them. So you give the fish a lure that looks a lot like what it's eating most days.

Rogas said that what he likes best about this event is "that there aren't

any rules. At least not many. You go out, catch fish and bring in the biggest by a certain time each day."

It's probably possible to have such simple rules for a muskie tournament only on Lake St. Clair. If you held a biggest-fish tourney for walleyes here, you'd have to worry about someone having a friend catch a 9-pounder on Lake Erie and sneak it into the tournament.

But, as Rogas said, when it comes to muskies, "The best chance of catching a big one is right here. Where else can you go in the country where they are averaging five muskies a day? Nowhere."

While Lake St. Clair generally offers the best shot at catching numbers of muskies (in many parts of the country one a week would be a good record), the best time to catch a 20-pound-plus muskie is coming up, usually running from the first week in September into early to mid-October. The fish seem able to sense that tough times are coming and go on a feeding binge before the winter.

At least that's the best explanation I can come up with for why most trophy muskies are caught in fall. But I'm not one to look gift horses in the mouth. I'll take a 20-pound muskie anytime I can get one.

Miller can be reached at 1-313-429-9551.

ERIC SHARP

Outdoors

