

# Big Muskie Want Fast-moving Lures

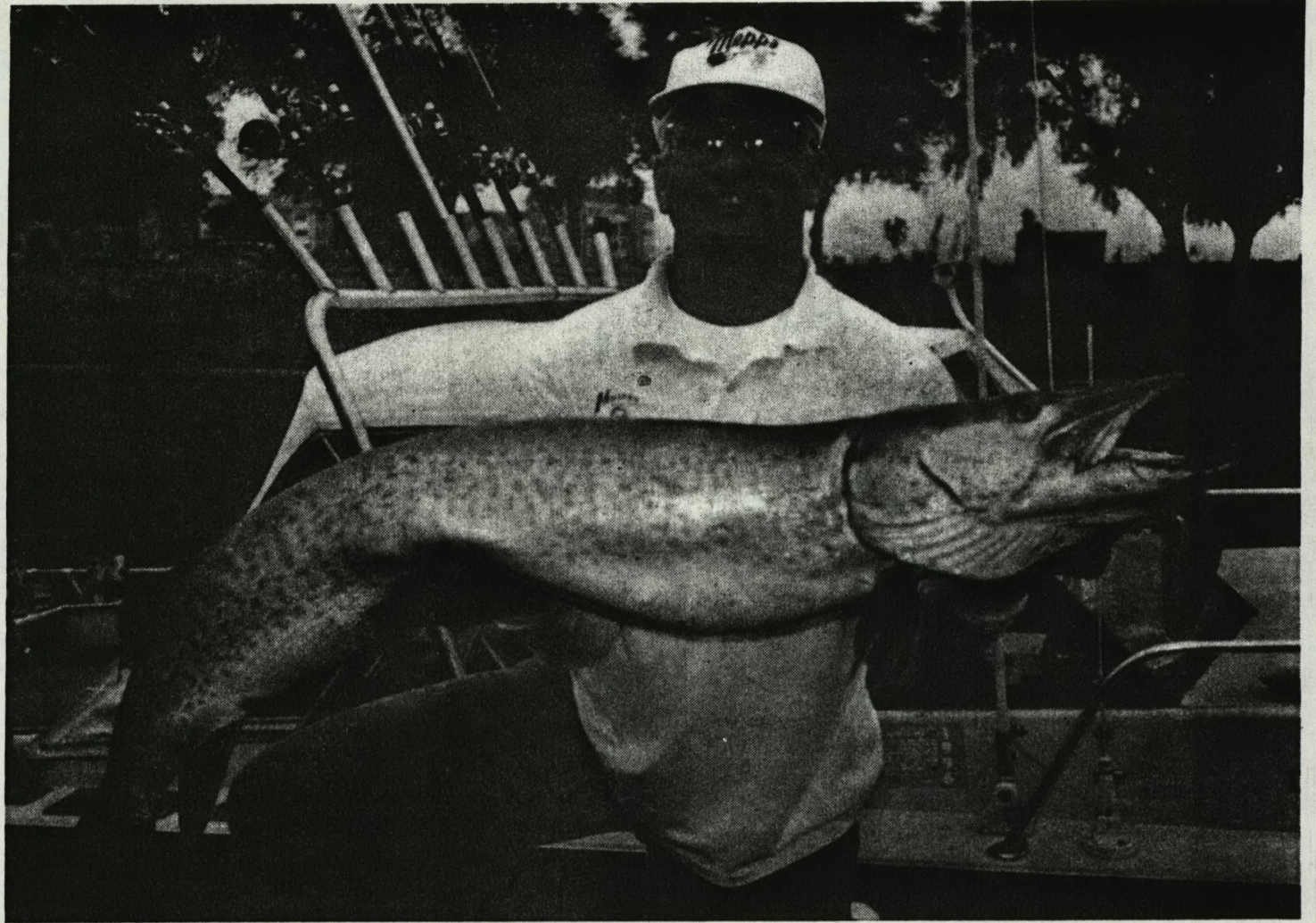
BY GEORGE RICHEY

As we set lines, it really seemed like we were really moving across the water. "What's our trolling speed," I asked Captain Don Miller as we slipped through the water. "I normally troll about 5.5 miles per hour. I do slow down some if the water is discolored, and kick up the speed some when the water is clear. This way, a muskie has just enough time to react to the lure coming over the top of him and grab it," he said. Besides, this fast pace allows Miller to show lures to more fish during the day by covering more water.

It was formerly thought that a muskie is a once-in-a-lifetime fish, but Captain Miller's records show he is able to consistently put anglers into good numbers of fish. "Much of what I learned on muskie fishing came from the late and great Captain Homer LeBlanc. He was a stern instructor, and he wanted me to learn to fish muskie the proper way," Don said.

In 1994, the anglers who chartered him landed 163 muskie out of 211 opportunities. That's an excellent ratio for these big fish. He doesn't allow anglers to keep muskie less than 45 inches (minimum size is 42 inches), and prefers that fish near the 30-pound mark be kept if someone wants one for a wall mount. In 1994, he had 15 Michigan DNR Master Angler fish landed, with a minimum of 45 inches or a 20-pound fish. Many of these fish were released. His largest muskie landed in 1994 was a trophy-sized, 30-pound, two-ounce fish.

I asked why the speed was so fast. "You can present a lure to a muskie slowly, which gives them too much



Captain Don Miller and a 33-pound muskie taken from Lake St. Clair.

time to follow or reject the lure. With the faster speed, the fish has to react instantly to grab the lure, and they do it so viciously that the hook-setting ratio is vastly improved over the slower speeds. You cannot pull a plug away from a muskie at our normal, 5.5 miles per hour boat speed. Running the lures close to the boat was part of Homer's strategy and has proven itself many times over. The muskie is fearless," said our skipper.

Muskie season opens June 3rd on Lake St. Clair, and probably the best time as far as numbers of muskie caught would be the end of June through Labor Day. For big fish, the month of August often produces bigger fish. The weather is hot, the water temperatures are warm, and the muskie are actively feeding and respond well to a fast-trolled plug or spoon.

"We normally troll in 17- to 20-feet of water, and the weed growth comes to within six or eight feet of the surface. The muskie will lie in ambush in the weeds. As the lure wriggles past the muskie, they can slant upwards out of the weeds with their famous burst of speed and attack the plug or a hapless perch," Don Miller told me.

Miller runs quite a few plugs, including the wooden Mason and Gotscha lures made in St. Clair Shores, the Swim Whizz lure originated by Homer LeBlanc, and the Believer, which is very similar, as well as the occasional Creek Chub Pikie Minnow. In fact, last year I landed a good-sized muskie on the old-time bait.

The largest muskie I've taken with Don Miller hit a rainbow-colored Believer plug, pulling the scales down to 22 pounds, and it measured 44 inches. It wasn't heavy enough to warrant keeping the fish, although it was of legal size. I shot a couple of pictures of the fish and quickly released it.

Don told me, "The catch-and-release ethic has taken hold on Lake St. Clair, and the average size of the muskie has grown. Muskie fishing has improved a great deal in the past 20 years. A fish of 15 to 20 pounds was a good fish back then, and now, with many fish being released and

caught again, the elusive 30-pound fish are a relatively commonplace catch today."

Muskie can live 30 to 35 years and often weigh a pound or a bit more per year of age. With more anglers catching and releasing muskie, these fish have been caught several times. They aren't afraid of anything and will attack almost anything smaller than themselves. The muskie is an extremely hardy fish, so most fish will be able to withstand the rigors of being caught, provided they are quickly released and not held out of the water for minutes while someone tries to focus a camera. If the fish can be landed, a quick "hero" shot taken and released inside a minute, that muskie should be in good shape.

Our most recent trip with Captain Miller attested to the fact that he is probably the top muskie charter skipper operating on Lake St. Clair today. When we finished up our day, we had landed four muskie out of four fish on. The heaviest was a 22-pound fish, and the other three fish were just under legal size.

A prime time for big fish is in late September, and October will often produce some big fish. There won't be the numbers of fish on the line as there are in June and July, but the chance of a big fish is always there. In fact, the largest muskie Don ever caught was landed in October, with the fish measuring 54 inches, and it weighed in just over 40 pounds.

Don Miller has been a muskie guide for over 20 years, and he learned from the best. Homer LeBlanc was a world-famous muskie guide, as well as a fishing lure manufacturer. Homer originated the Swim Whizz lure, which was first made from wood and now made of plastic. He also made the Swim Zag spoon and the 4B spinner. "Homer was the last of the great guides, and he knew Lake St. Clair intimately. Most of my customers are catching fish using the same techniques that Homer taught me," Don said.

Don quickly lets everyone know that all he's doing is passing on the techniques that Homer taught him. "The only thing I do different than what I learned from the master is using plugs off a planer board, which

allows the baits to run well to the sides of the boat. This allows me to use the close-to-the-boat techniques, the 'down' rod and lures running closer to the corner of the boat," he said. My last trip with Don resulted in three of the four fish landed coming off the "down" rod.

Miller organized the first Homer LeBlanc Musky Classic on Lake St. Clair, which was held in September of 1993. This tournament usually results in some king-sized muskie being taken. Many of the fishermen are members of the Michigan-Ontario Musky Club, and often many of the fish will be returned to the lake to continue growing and putting on more pounds.

It's difficult to describe the thrill of seeing a big muskie boiling up off the corner of the boat. These fish have fire in their eyes, and they are mad. The drag on the reels are set fairly stiff, and a big muskie will easily take line off the reels. Occasionally they will jump, and that is a sight—seeing a four-foot fish in the air.

Captain Don Miller typically runs his charters from 8:30 to 5:30. He charges \$500 per day and will take up to six passengers. For further information on a muskie charter, call 313-429-9551 or write him at 471 Canterbury St., Saline, MI 48176.

Depending on the time of year, Miller will fish in Michigan waters in June and usually switches to Canadian waters in July and August. Water color dictates where he will fish. "I learned from Homer to always save a little time so you can troll towards home, rather than running back. Many times I've had a good fish or two hit on the run home as the charter is winding down," he said.

Don told me, "My best day for muskie was 19 fish, and probably my finest day ever was when we caught nine muskie and 26 walleye." He's quick to tell anyone that days like that are rare, but catches of two to four muskie a trip aren't uncommon. He's a class act and works hard to get his customers into fish. He proved that a fast trolling speed works wonders on the black-spotted, silver-colored muskie of Lake St. Clair.