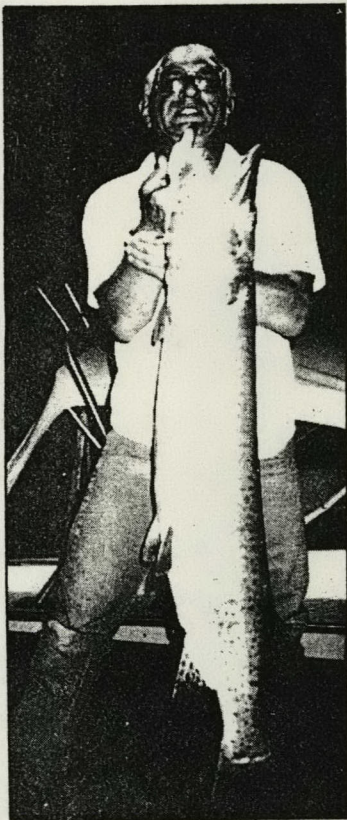


Fast trolling for big muskie . . .

By George Richey

We began setting lures and it seemed like we were flying across the water. "How fast are we trolling," I asked Captain Don Miller as we sliced through the water. "I normally troll about 5.5 miles per hour. I may slow down a bit if the water is churned and dirty, 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 speed allows Miller to show lures to more



Captain Don Miller of Saline, with a 36 pound trophy muskie. Photo by George Richey

fish during the day by covering more water.

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

A year ago, the anglers that chartered Don landed 163 muskie out of 211 opportunities. That's excellent fishing for these big fish. He won't let fishermen keep muskies shorter than 45 inches (minimum size is 42") and prefer 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 last year with a minimum of 45" or 20 pound fish. Many of these fish were released. His largest muskie landed in 1994 was a trophy sized 30 pound 2 ounce fish.

I asked Don why the speed was so fast. He responded, "you can present a lure to a muskie slowly, and it gives them too much time to follow or reject the lure. With the



Author with a 44 inch, 22 pound muskie taken on a rainbow colored Believer Plug.

faster speed, the muskie has to make up its mind instantly to grab the lure and they do it so viciously, that the hook setting ratio is vastly improved over the slower speeds. You simply can't 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 it's proven itself many times over. The muskie is fearless."

Muskie season opens June 3, and probably the best time as far as numbers of muskie caught would be the end of June through Labor Day. August often produces the 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 often troll in 17 to 20 feet of water and the weed growth will come to within six to eight feet of the surface, and the muskie lay in ambush in the weeds. As the lure wiggles 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," the Skipper told me.

He 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 old-time Creek Chub Pikie minnow. In fact, last year, I landed a good sized muskie on one.

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

Don told me, "Since the catch and release ethic took hold on Lake St. Clair, the average size of the muskie has grown. Muskie fishing has vastly improved 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 relatively common place catch today," Captain Miller told us.

The muskie can live up to 30 to 35 years, and often weight a pound or a bit more per year of age. With more and more anglers catching and releasing muskie, these fish have been caught several times, but they

aren't afraid of anything, and will attack almost anything smaller than themselves. They are a extremely hardy fish, most fish will be able to withstand the rigors of being caught, provided they are released quickly, and not held out of 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 further established the fact that he is probably the top muskie charter skipper operating on the Great Lakes today. We finished up our day landing four muskie out of four fish on. The heaviest was a 22 pound fish, and the other three fish were just under legal size.

Another prime time for big fish is in late September, and October often will produce some big fish. There won't be the numbers of fish on the line as there can be in June and July, but the chance for a big fish is always there. In fact, the largest muskie Don ever caught was taken in October, and the fish measured 54 inches and 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. Homer was world famous as a muskie guide, as well as 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 Homer taught me," Don said.

Don is quick to let everyone know that all he's doing is passing on the same knowledge that Homer taught him. "About 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 lure running close 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.

Don organized the First Homer LeBlanc Muskie Classic on Lake St. Clair which was held in September of 1993. This tournament usually produces some king-size muskie taken. Many of the fishermen are members of the Michigan-Ontario Muskie Club, and often many of the fish are returned to the lake to continue growing and putting on pounds.

It's hard 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 drags on the reels are set fairly stiff, and a big muskie will peel line off the reels easily. Occa-



Butch Thompson of Honor with a 38 inch muskie, his first. Photo by George Richey

sionally 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 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. 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 Street, Saline, MI 48176.

Depending on the time of year, he will fish either in Michigan waters in June, and usually switches to Canadian waters in July and August. Depending on 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, "his best day on muskie was 19 fish, and probably my finest day ever was when we caught nine muskie and 26 wall-eye." He is quick to tell anyone that days like that are rare, but catches of two to four muskie per trip aren't uncommon. He is a class act, and he works hard to get his customers into fish. He also proved that a fast trolling speed works wonders on the lean, mean silver muskie of Lake St. Clair. ■