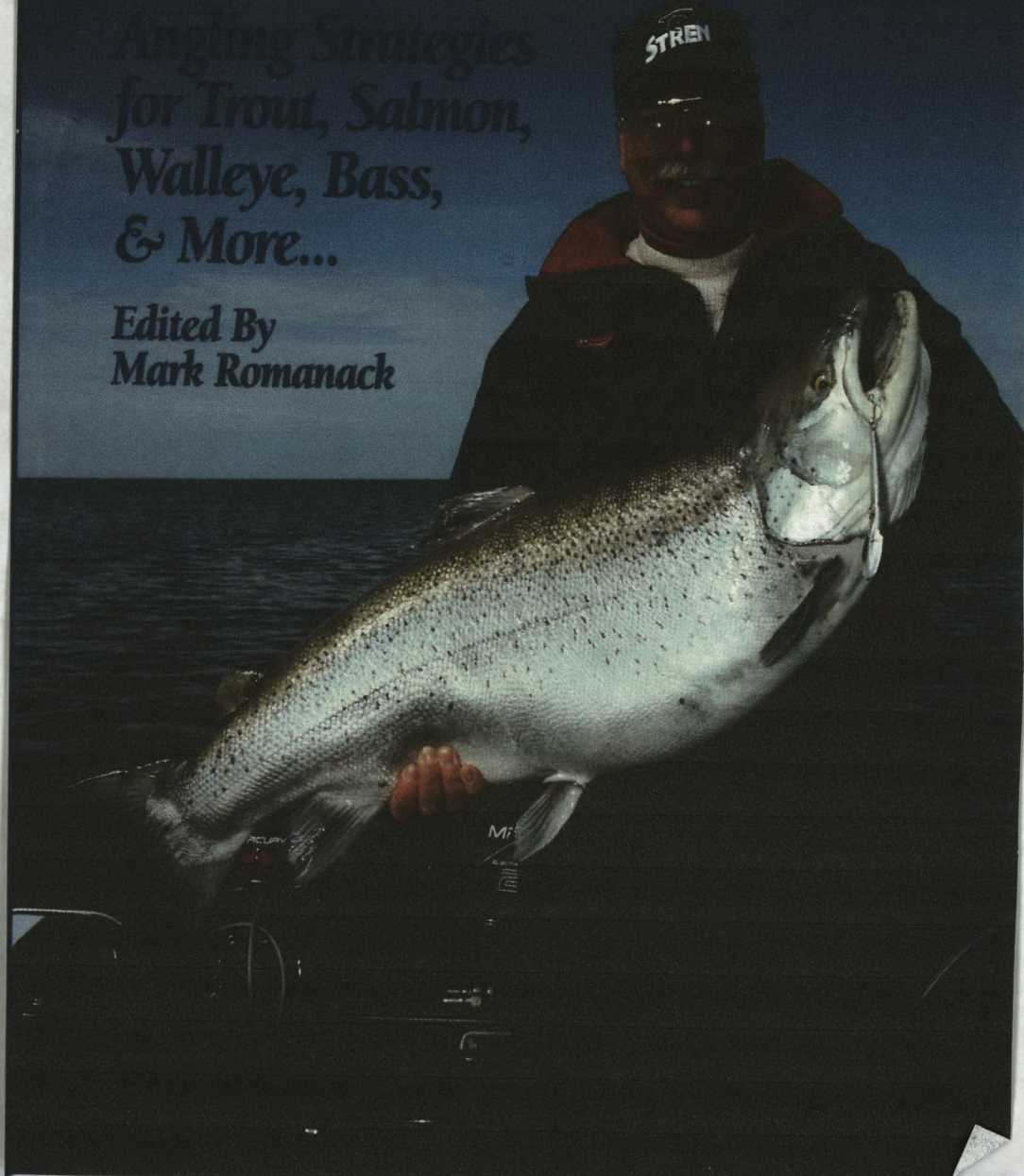


Trolling Top to Bottom

Angling Strategies
for Trout, Salmon,
Walleye, Bass,
& More...

Edited By
Mark Romanack



Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike

Chapter 20 *Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike*

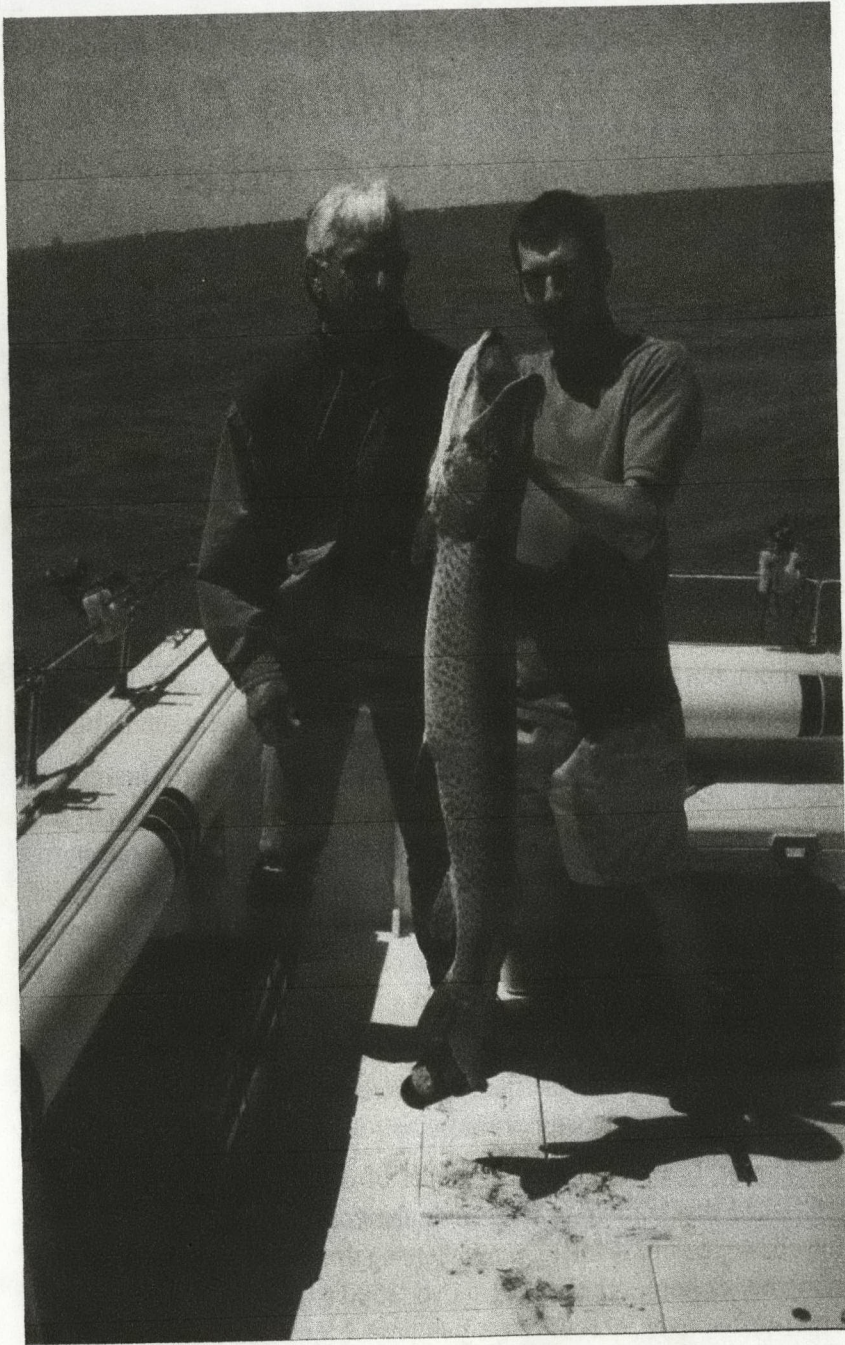
By
Don Miller

The sport we affectionately call fishing is made up from as much mythology as fact. This is especially true when talk turns to the muskellunge. The largest member of the *Esox* or pike family, anglers who fish for musky have been known to exaggerate a little. Surprisingly, the exaggerations aren't centered so much on the size of the fish. Musky are commonly taken in the 30 pound class and occasionally a fish upwards of 50 pounds is landed! It's a fact that musky grow big wherever you find them, but despite their often huge size these fish aren't the mystical and elusive predator of the deep that anglers make them out to be.

Musky aren't nearly as difficult to catch as you might imagine and they certainly don't have the brain power to think their way out of being captured by sportfishing pressure. The number of musky taken in most waters is low simply because the population of fish per acre of water is equally low. Natural lakes, backwaters and sluggish streams can only support a limited number of these primary predators, just like the grasslands of Africa can only support so many lions.

When musky are exposed to larger environments with ample food, cover and spawning habitat, their numbers increase dramatically. Simply put, these large waters support more and larger fish.

Lake St. Clair is a prime example of a world class musky fishery. I've fished this sprawling lake since the early 70's and have run a full time charter business for 12 years. During this period I'm comfortable in saying my customers have caught over 2500 adult musky. I'm also proud to report that over 90% of these fish have been photographed, weighed and measured for a graphite replica mount then released to fight again.



Captain Don Miller produces over 300 musky per year for his customers. His trolling tactics were developed from musky fishing legend Homer LeBlanc.

Open Water Trolling Tactics For Musky & Pike

In recent years I've averaged over 300 adult fish per year. A good day of fishing on Lake St. Clair can yield as many as eight legal musky! Compared to the world famous musky waters of Northern Wisconsin, well lets just say that Lake St. Clair is in a class all itself.

Anglers who work the traditional musky waters of Wisconsin, Minnesota and southern Ontario often fish for days without even getting a follow. With fishing conditions like these, it's easy to see where the slogan of musky fishing, ie: the fish of a thousand casts, gets its roots.

For the record, virtually every fish I've landed on Lake St. Clair has been taken using trolling tactics developed by my mentor and friend the late Homer LeBlanc. Homer helped me understand the musky as a game fish and taught me how to take advantage of it's opportunistic feeding habits.

Understanding what makes a musky tick is the key to catching these awesome trophies. An adult musky is a fish with an attitude. An attitude that develops simply from being on the top of the food chain. Imagine how you might act if you were the largest fish in your environment and capable of eating almost anything that swims. Musky have no natural predators once they reach adult size. Sport fishing pressure is the only threat to musky survival.

I believe that musky have an attitude similar to that of a lion. These efficient predators are opportunistic eating what they can get and when they can get it. Usually this translates into forage that strays too close to their powerful jaws and sharp teeth. The list of foods musky eat is a long one, starting with injured, sick or dying baitfish, followed closely by other species of fish such as suckers, drum, yellow perch, bass, walleye, northern pike and even young musky. For additional protein these fish have also been known to take ducklings, young muskrats, frogs, snakes and just about anything else that ends up in the water.

I've taken some strange things out of the stomachs of musky over the years including red and white bobbers, various pieces of trash and even an adult walleye that must have weighed five or six pounds!

The startling thing about trophy musky is it's obvious they are capable of eating prey much larger than the largest fishing lures designed to catch these giants. Can you imagine trolling with a 20 inch long Believer or

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casting a two pound Dardevle. Sound crazy? Sure, but the fact remains that musky survive in part by feeding on large forage that allows them to feed less often.

The fact that musky are somewhat selective in their feeding habits is one of the major reasons I'm convinced that trolling is the most efficient means of catching these fish. Trolling, especially the speed trolling tactics developed by Homer LeBlanc, generate a reactionary type strike from musky as opposed to casting or slow trolling which allows the fish the opportunity to follow and scrutinize the baits.

I'm not saying that musky swim up and look at slow moving baits, then make a conscious decision that the bait is a fake. More likely, slow moving baits trigger a following response because the fish knows it can catch this meal any time it chooses.

Faster moving baits don't allow musky the luxury of following the bait like a wolf follows an injured deer waiting for the right moment to pounce. When a fast moving bait passes by a musky his instinctive reactions take over and the rest of the story is history.

Trolling is the only practical way to move baits at the speeds it takes to trigger a reactionary strike from large predators like musky. Sure you can cast lures and reel them in quickly to achieve the same effect, but can you imagine doing it for hour after hour, after hour?

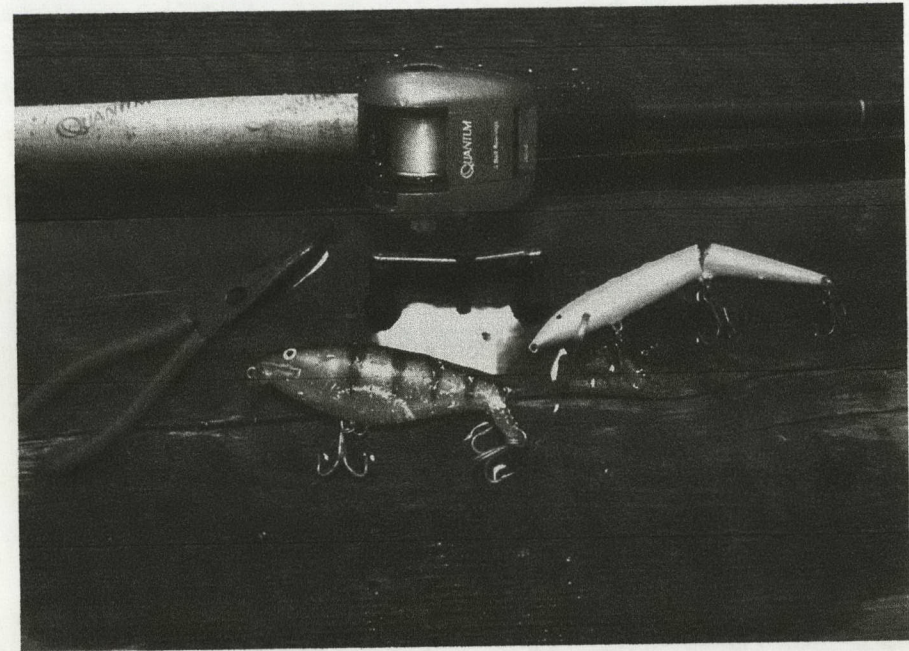
TROLLING SPEED

The specifics of Homer LeBlanc's speed trolling tactics are amazingly basic and simple. Homer believed and so do I that the key to triggering strikes in warm water fishing conditions is maintaining speeds up to six miles per hour! To a guy who's primarily fishes walleye, salmon and other species, six miles per hour may sound unrealistic, but it works.

When the season opens in June and through August I keep my boat moving at this fast pace all the time. Not only does trolling fast trigger reactionary strikes, but it also allows me to cover an enormous amount of water during the course of eight or 10 hours of fishing.

When the water begins to cool in September, October and into November, trollers are forced to slow down to some degree. Cool water slows down the activity level of all fish and the musky is no exception. Still, in cool water trolling speeds around four miles per hour seem to

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Trophy musky and northern pike are hard on fishing tackle. These lures have seen the enemy and lost.

produce the most strikes.

In the fall I also switch to larger baits. It's well documented that predator fish key on larger forage during the fall. Musky and other predators such as northern pike and walleye select larger forage during the fall period as a means of being more efficient in their feeding habits. Keying on large prey allows them to feed less often, saving valuable energy that will be needed during the lean winter months and the rigors of the spring spawning periods.

MUSKY TROLLING LURES

A multitude of lures have been designed to catch musky. Despite what you might imagine a self proclaimed musky addict's tackle box looks like, I use a rather modest selection of baits including the Believer and Musky Stalker baits by Drifter Tackle. I like Believers in the eight inch and 10 inch models in both solid and jointed versions. The Musky Stalker is a smaller bait about six inches long that is used mostly during

the summer months.

I also have a lot of faith in a bait called the Terminator made by Esoc Design. The model T-3 is my favorite. There are also many other excellent musky baits worth trying, but for my charter purposes these three basic lures fill a trolling niche nicely.

My color selection is also somewhat conservative. During the summer when the weather is mostly clear and bright, I prefer light colored and chrome lures such as mother of pearl, rainbow, light frog or blue and silver.

During the fall darker colors seem to produce better against the gray fall skies. My favorites are dark frog, yellow perch and the classic black and orange.

RODS/REELS/LINES

Chances are the rods you already own aren't going to be suitable for musky speed trolling tactics. I use three different rods types on my boat including a short three and a half footer that fishes straight out the back of the boat with the tip pointed down towards the water, a 10 foot Dipsy style rod that fishes out from the port and starboard sides and a six foot rod used on planer board lines.

My rods are all custom built, but with a little effort you can find suitable trolling rods at bait and tackle shops in the Lake St. Clair area. Anglers who live outside this region should consult rod manufactures to inquire about their salt water rod selection.

All my rods are made from fiberglass. Graphite rods are simply too fragile for the abuse this equipment receives. In other words, don't fool yourself into thinking your \$100.00 graphite bucktail rod is okay for this type of fishing. Chances are your prized possession will be destroyed in short order.

For reels I'm sold on the standard Penn 309 levelwind reels. I also use Daiwa 47LC reels on my planer board rods. The line counter device on these reels is handy for monitoring trolling leads.

These reels are loaded with premium 40 pound test monofilament with a six foot leader of 100 pound test. The lures are connected to the leader using a stout cross loc style snap.

RIGGING TECHNIQUES

The rigging techniques used for musky speed trolling are somewhat unique. On planer board lines in-line style trolling weights ranging from one to four ounces are tied to the end of the 40 pound test main line. Next a six to eight foot leader of 100 pound test is added and the rig completed with a stout cross lok snap that accepts the bait.

In most trolling situations this rig receives a 30 to 40 foot trolling lead and is set out on a dual planer board running about 40 feet to the side of the boat. When musky trolling with boards it isn't necessary to set the boards out 75 or 100 feet to the side.

A single board line is run off each side of the boat. Each board line is attached to the tether line using an Off Shore Tackle OR-8 Heavy Tension release. This unique pinch pad line release features a double spring that provides the tension required to insure positive hooksets. If releases with less tension are used, many fish that strike are able to shake the bait free before being landed.

The Dipsy style rods receive the same rigging treatment as the board lines, but these rods are run perpendicular to the side of the boat with the tip pointed down towards the water. A rod 10 foot rod is set off each corner of the boat to help cover a little more water and spread out the lures into a loose school formation.

The stout three and a half footers that run straight off the back are equipped with much more weight. A full 16 ounce or 24 ounce lead ball is attached at the end of the main line with a heavy snap then a six foot leader of 100 pound test added.

The extra weight is required to keep these lines running right behind the motor prop. These lures are literally swimming in the prop wash and that's part of what makes them so effective.

Remember the attitude that musky live by. These lions of freshwater fishing aren't intimidated by fishing boats, but rather they thrive on the feeding opportunities provided when a boat passes through a school of baitfish. A Believer pulled in the prop wash does an excellent job of imitating a fish that's been injured or disorientated by the passing boat. Musky waste no time in taking advantage of this easy meal.

THE SIX LINE SET UP

Trolling with only six lines may seem odd to many trollers who are used to fishing eight, 10 or 12 lines. Much of the time planer lines are being trolled in areas that are littered with aquatic weeds anchored to the bottom or floating on the surface. The board lines must be cleared and checked constantly to make sure they aren't fouled with weeds, that's why I only run one board line on each side.

I'm a firm believer that six rods rigged correctly and fishing clean will out produce other boats fishing up to twice as many lines. It's just too hard to keep all the lines weed free when you start dealing with more than half a dozen lines.

WHERE THE ACTION TAKES PLACE

Good to excellent open water musky trolling opportunities occur throughout the deeper waters of Lake St. Clair. When you get into the shallow bays such as Mitchell's Bay, the primary predator switches from musky to the smaller northern pike.

I spend most of my time trolling in water from 12 to 15 feet deep. Early in the season before the weeds start to grow you can fish in water a little shallower.

Musky prefer the open waters of the lake, relating to a variety of features such as weed edges, bottom structure, channel edges, flowing water and debris on the bottom such as around the dumping grounds. Among these areas I have my most consistent success in places where two different colors of water come together.

Because Lake St. Clair has a major river flowing in (St. Clair River) and a major flow going out (Detroit River) there's always a movement of water passing through the lake. The lake also receives a considerable amount of boat traffic that stirs up the water and adds to the movement of water colors.

CASHING IN ON NORTHERN PIKE

My charter business focuses strictly on musky. However, I usually take three or four dozen trophy size northern pike a year as a bonus to my musky fishing efforts. Trolling tactics for musky can be equally effective on pike so long as some minor modifications are made.

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First off, since northern pike are smaller fish on the average than musky, I'd downsize my lures to specifically target pike. Many of the classic lures used for musky will work on pike, plus a wealth of other body baits such as the Storm Shallow Mac, Rebel Minnow, Bomber, A.C. Plug and Super Shad Rap are good choices.

Also, pike are more likely to end up in deep water than musky. In many waters northerns suspend in the water column over deep water mud flats. Pike living in these areas feed on suspended forages such as smelt, ciscoes, alewives or shad and have no reason to come near a weed bed all summer long.

To fish these deep water areas I'd want a few diving cranks that are capable of fishing from 10 to 30 feet below the surface. A few baits that come to mind include the Storm Little and Big Mac, Deep Diving ThunderStick and Magnum Wiggle Wart, plus the Bomber 26A, Luhr Jensen Powerdive Minnow, Mann's Stretch 20 and 25 and Cotton Cordell's Magnum Wally Diver. The obvious way to fish these lures is with planer boards.

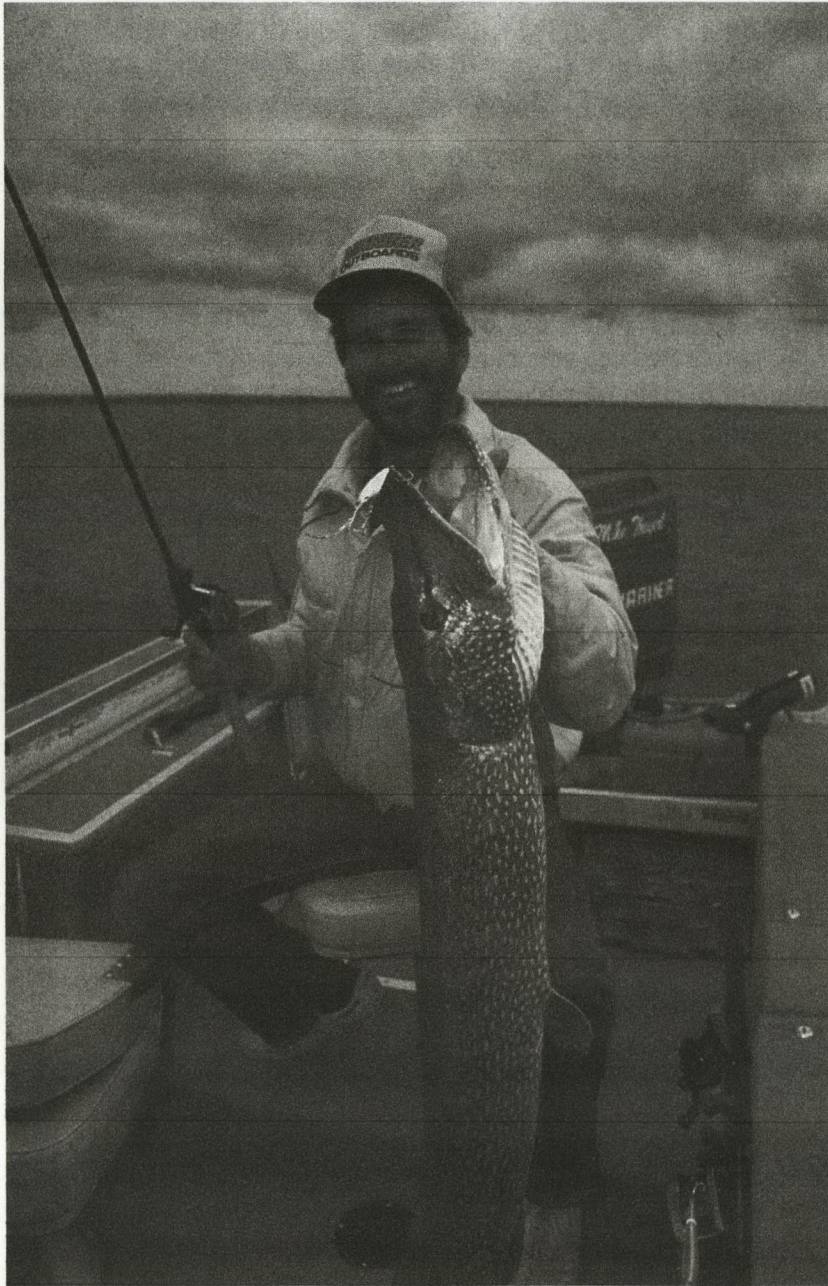
I'd also drop my trolling speed down considerably when targeting northern pike. Trolling speeds ranging from three to four miles per hour are ideal for northerns.

If I found myself fishing more traditional pike water such as weed edges or over the tops of weed beds, I'd stick with shallow diving lures and the six rod system described for musky speed trolling.

Trolling for northern pike also brings up another question. Will the tactics I use to catch musky on Lake St. Clair work elsewhere? The answer is yes. A musky acts like a musky no matter where he lives. Speed trolling is one of the most effective ways of finding and catching these popular trophies.

However, there's also some bad news to report. On many waters especially in Northern Wisconsin, trolling is not allowed for musky fishing. Fisheries managers fear that the delicate population of fish in many of these waters would be seriously damaged if trolling tactics were allowed. Before testing out these tactics, check with your local game and fish department about special regulations against musky trolling in certain waters.

Ironically, it wouldn't matter how you choose to catch musky if more anglers would simply release their fish to fight again. With the technology



Big northern pike are often found in open water. This trophy was taken while trolling crankbaits in Little Bay de Noc.

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we have today to produce excellent replica fish mounts, there's no reason to ever kill a trophy class musky.

I believe that musky are more valuable in the water than they are hanging on the wall. After all, it's the mysteriousness of big fish that attracts anglers to musky fishing. The dream of someday hooking into a 30, 40 or 50 pound musky is what keeps this unique breed of fisherman coming back for more.

The same could be said of all trophy class fish. The trolling tactics detailed in this book will make anyone a more efficient and successful angler. With this newly acquired skill comes the responsibility of knowing when to say enough.

I sincerely hope that all who read this book will abide by a simple code of ethics. Limit your kill instead of killing your limit.

**Don Miller is a charter captain, fishing educator and musky trolling addict.*