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Columnists - Goodman

Column

Man vs. muskie: One trophy that didn't get away

■ Register Star columnist survives duel with Lake St. Clair monster

DOUG GOODMAN, *Rockford Register Star*

LAKE ST. CLAIR, Mich. — ZIIIIING!

My reel spun furiously as the muskie fled with yard after yard of 40-pound test line.

ZIIIIING!

My left forearm strained to hold the rod tip up while the fish fought to pull enough slack to spit out the lure.

ZIIIIING!

My right hand cranked nonstop on the reel, gaining a few yards of line and then losing nearly as much to the irate muskie.

Finally, after a 20-minute duel, the exhausted muskie came close enough to the charter boat that it could be netted.

I had caught my first-ever muskie. And it was a big one: 52 inches, 34 pounds.

My arms ached as I held up the fish for a quick photo session before releasing it. I tried to hold it with one hand, but the weight was too much.

I tried to smile for the photos; the best I could do was a pained look as I

struggled to keep the fish elevated.

A roll of film later, the muskie returned to the lake and I returned to my seat.

The battle was over.

And we both survived.

Decision on trip

The idea to venture to Lake St. Clair for muskie fishing came from professional angler Mike Norris, whom I heard speak at the local Muskie Inc. club meeting in February.

He talked about his success on the lake outside of Detroit that averages only 15 feet deep. He also recommended charter captain Don Miller. I was sold on the trip.

Miller was booked for the weekend I was planning to visit relatives in Michigan. But he suggested I contact the Illinois couple who had booked his boat for June 23.

I e-mailed Joe and Kathy Wambach of Aurora with my request to join them. They agreed, and my first-ever muskie fishing trip was set.

However, it didn't turn out to be my initial attempt to hook a muskie.

In May I went with members of Rockford's Flatlanders chapter of Muskie Inc. to Lake Wingra for Wisconsin's season opener. I spent 12 hours casting without a bite. I began questioning the Lake St. Clair decision, but I was committed and there was no turning back.

On the boat

I arrived at the harbor in the Detroit suburb of St. Clair Shores just before 5 p.m. Saturday. Joe and Kathy were already there.

After exchanging greetings we boarded Miller's 32-foot boat and went over safety procedures. Miller, a 25-year veteran guide, also explained what would happen when we had a fish on -- one person would man the rod, another would steer the boat and the other would stay out of key spots on the deck that might interfere with landing the fish.

We began our four-hour trip at 5:30 p.m.

While heading to a promising location, Miller shared some background on his boat and his career:

-- Biggest muskie caught on his boat in 2001: 49 inches, 27 pounds on

June 20.

-- Biggest muskie ever caught on his boat: 56 inches, 44 pounds in July 1999. "Just one walleye away from the state record of 47 pounds, 12 ounces," he noted.

-- All muskies caught on his boat are released. He said the fish survival rate is perfect for the past five years.

-- He has 85 to 100 booking dates each year. For 2001 he has 78 dates already booked, but he added cancellations do occur. He starts taking reservations Dec. 1.

At 6 p.m. we arrived at the spot 13 miles west of Detroit's shoreline where Miller had been having success. He put out six rods with 40-pound test line and 100-pound monofilament leaders.

Trolling at 5 mph, the first bite came 15 minutes later. We earlier agreed Kathy would get the first hit, followed by me and Joe. Kathy started to reel while Miller removed the other poles, and Joe drove the boat. I stayed out of the way with camera in hand.

We were ready, but the fish wasn't and spit the lure.

Fifteen minutes later, we had our second hit.

I rushed to the designed spot on the deck and the battle began.

Miller said the fish had nailed the lure, a Dark Frog Believer, about 10 feet behind the boat, and then took off.

"It had 150 yards of line out there before you knew it," he said after releasing the fish.

He also noticed how lucky I actually was -- the female muskie had chewed two-thirds of the way through the leader. Miller gave me the damaged piece of line as a souvenir.

"He did a number on it," the captain said, adding that he believed that fish might be 40 pounds by fall.

Miller thought the muskie was in the weed beds and came out as the sky became overcast.

"It came out and got stupid," said Miller, who is a disciple of muskie fishing legend Homer LeBlanc.

Joe and Kathy later both caught muskies in the 30-inch range and we lost one other.

All agreed it was a successful outing.

Top 10 fish

I returned to work Monday with pictures of my first muskie. I must have repeated the story 20 times. I also checked our Big Fish records and discovered my muskie was tied for eighth-largest among those reported to the Register Star since 1982.

I also talked to Flatlanders members who suggested I have a replica made. It will cost about \$500, but it will be worth it -- a reminder of the one that didn't get away.

Doug Goodman covers outdoors for the Rockford Register Star. If you have information you'd like to submit for the Sunday outdoors page, contact him at (815) 987-1386, fax 987-1204 or e-mail dgoodman@smtp.registerstartower.com



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