

BIGGER AND BETTER

Muskie have been getting plenty husky

By ERIC SHARP
FREE PRESS PORTS WRITER

It was a case of "You snooze, you lose."

Ed Mikula had already caught a 15-pound muskellunge while fishing with charter skipper Don Miller on Lake St. Clair, and when another fish grabbed a lure and began ripping off line, it was another fisherman's turn to play it.

But that guy had gone below to use the head on Miller's boat, Motor City Muskies, so Miller told Mikula to take the rod.

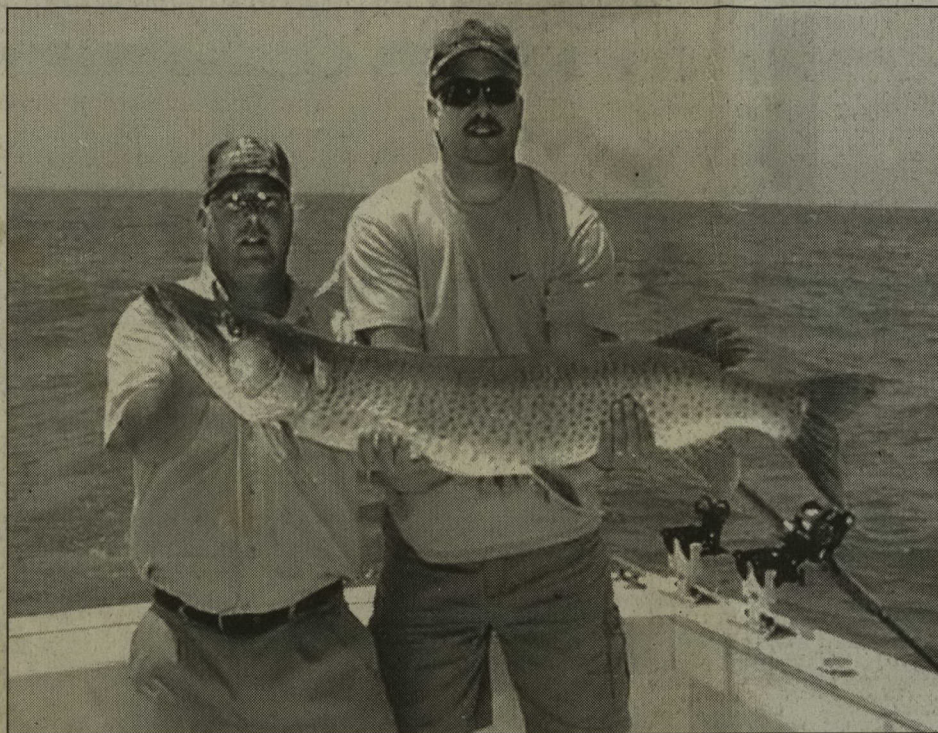
When Mikula suggested that they wait for the other angler, Miller said, "Tough luck. He shouldn't have gone potty." Which is why Mikula, a 72-year-old Livonia dentist, will soon have a 54-inch, 33-pound muskellunge mounted in a glass case as a souvenir of his first and only day of muskellunge fishing — and his experienced fishing buddy won't.

Mounting the fish wasn't part of the original plan. Miller encourages anglers to release fish, and the skipper and his four clients spent almost an hour in a fruitless effort to revive Mikula's big muskie.

Most Lake St. Clair muskies are caught by trolling specialists who have heavy rods, planer boards, downriggers and hundreds of huge lures that average \$15 each. But this season, the toothy, oversized pike are making their presence known to bass, walleye and perch fishermen as well.

"I caught three in one morning when I was fishing for bass with goby-colored tube baits," said Daryl Edison. "I caught three or four bass along the edge of a weed bed in about 10 feet of water, then a muskie hit the tube when I was bringing it up off the bottom almost under the boat. An hour later, I got another muskie the exact same way. Those fish were both under 10 pounds.

"But the last guy was the best one. I hooked a smallmouth that was barely legal, maybe 15 inches and two pounds, and I had it about 30 feet from the boat when something hit the bass so hard it nearly took the rod out of my hands,"



Courtesy of FRANK SHARE

Frank Share, left, captain of the charter Calamity, helps hold a 30-pound-plus muskie caught by Steve Rickert of Marine City on June 28. Rickert's muskie was one of four topping 30 pounds pulled out of Lake St. Clair by Calamity fishermen that day.

said Edison, who lives near Brighton. "I knew that a big predator, a muskie or a pike, had tried to eat the smallie.

"The line went slack, and I thought the fish had got off. But as I wound in it tightened up again, and line started peeling of the reel so fast I was getting worried. I was using a bait casting reel with 10-pound monofilament, and there was only about 80 yards of line on it.

"I got the muskie up to the boat in about 15 minutes, and just as I got the net under it, it spit out the bass. I think the bass was jammed in its teeth because the hook never got into the muskie.

"The muskie measured 47 inches. I put it back after I measured it. I put the bass back, too, but it was so mangled that it went belly up as soon as it went into the water."

Mikula's fish leads the muskie contest at Lakeside Fishing Shop in St. Clair Shores, where owner Dan Chimelak said that, "We've weighed in more 30-pound muskies and heard about more 30-pounders this year than ever before. We weighed in one at 36 pounds, and I've heard of quite a few other fish bigger than Ed Mikula's, but those people didn't enter them in the contest."

Frank Share, who runs the charter boat Calamity, said: "Everything is going nuts — muskies, bass, walleyes, perch. Ninety percent of my fishing is for muskies, but I do some bass and wall-

eye guiding too, and we've done well on every trip.

"You'll get the most walleyes fishing the (St. Clair) river, but the bigger fish are in the lake (St. Clair.) Muskie fishing is unbelievable. I've had seven fish over 30 pounds already this year. Last year, I got nine over 30 all season. I had three 30 pounders in one day this year.

"One thing that has helped this year is storms that have kicked up good mudlines in the lake. When I see one of those, I usually troll along the edge and weave in and out from the clear water to the mud. The bass and walleyes and perch are in there feeding, and the muskies are waiting at the edges to grab anything that sticks its head out. It's the circle of life, and it's great for fishermen."

Mike Pittiglio, skipper of the charterboat Muskie Mania, said that not only has muskellunge fishing been good, it has been good in conditions that were marginal in past years.

"It's weird," he said. "Usually, you only catch the bigger fish on days when there's a chop on the water. But this year we've caught just as many on flat water. Last year, I had 15 fish over 30 pounds. This year, I had nine over 30 in June — four on one day."

Pittiglio is a muskie fanatic who fishes for them even on days when he doesn't have charter clients.

Lake St. Clair is renowned as a place where anglers often catch as

many muskellunge in a day as other lakes produce in a season. It is also noted for producing large numbers of fish in the 30-36 pound range. But in modern times it has not produced a muskellunge that weighed 40 pounds on a certified scale, and that might be because that with a muskellunge population estimated at 30,000-plus, competition for food limits growth. Most 40-pound-plus muskellunge come from places with far smaller numbers of the giant pike.

But muskellunge reach their maximum size in September and October, when the fish go on a feeding binge to prepare for a long, cold winter under the ice. Many muskies put on 5-10 pounds during the fall, and with so many fish already in the mid-30 pound range, Pittiglio thinks this might be the year that someone hits the magic number.

"I'm really hopeful," he said. "Quite a few guys have already caught and released 54-inchers that went 32-36 pounds. If it keeps going this way, I think we'll see a 40-pound muskie come out of Lake St. Clair before the season ends."

Don Miller can be reached through www.millers-sportfishing.com.

Frank Share can be reached at 810-278-0111 or go to

www.southchannelcharters.com.

Mike Pittiglio can be reached at 586-260-4068 or go to

www.muskiemaniacharters.com.