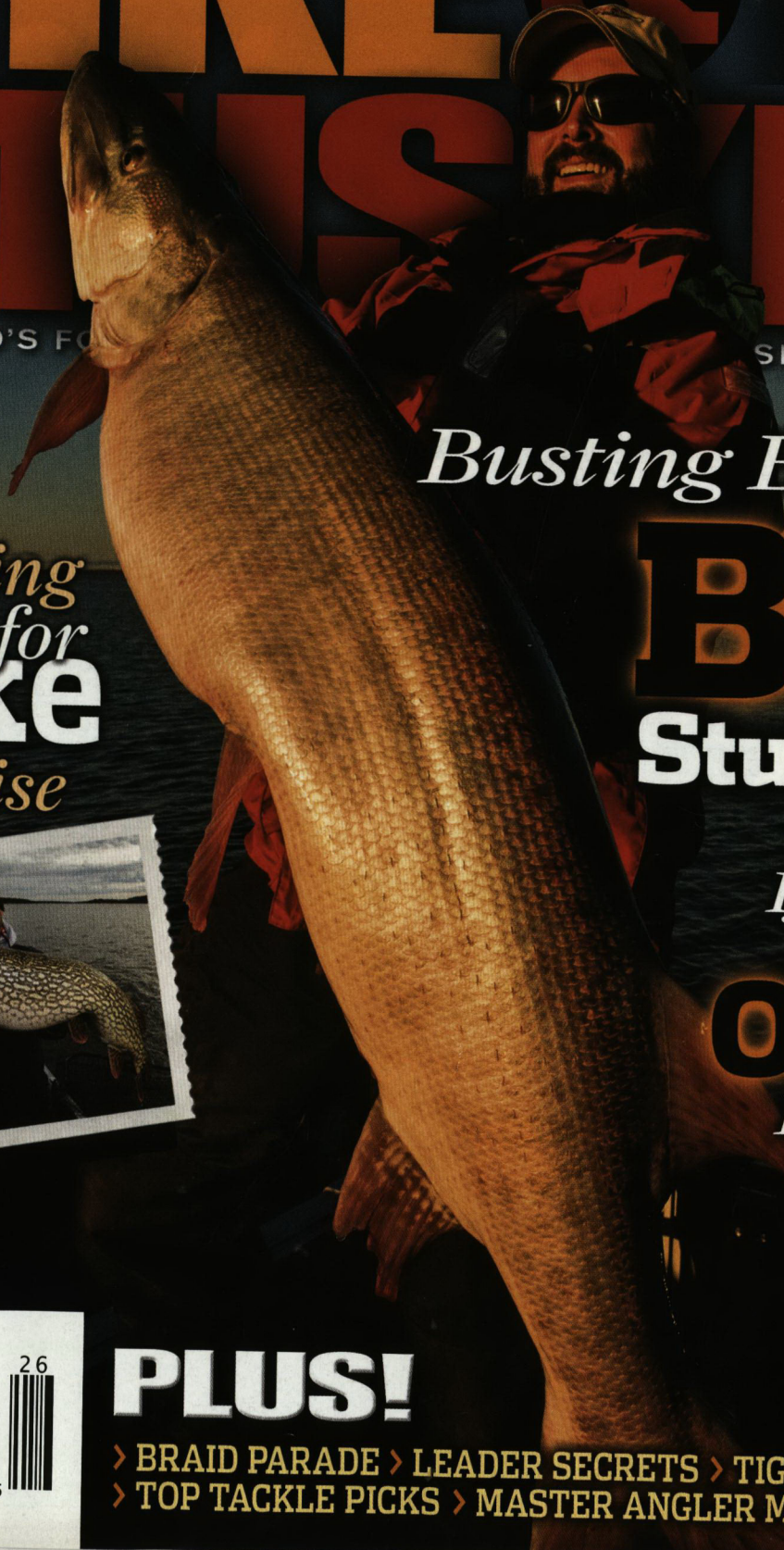


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Choosing the best material can be complicated. How heavy is the lure? How much freedom of movement does it require? Might it damage fish? Are you casting or trolling?

HERBIE AND THE FG KNOT

"You need different levels of stiffness or suppleness for various applications," says veteran muskie Guide Steve "Herbie" Herbeck—former owner of Andy Myers Lodge on Eagle Lake in Ontario (now at the lodge in as consultant and master guide). "I keep it simple for clients, but I believe muskies become more cautious in some conditions so I often use long fluorocarbon leaders, often 2 to 4 feet of 80-pound Seaguar Premier Fluorocarbon for casting. I use double uni knots to connect that to 14 inches of 130-pound fluoro at the business end, depending on how stealthy I want to get. I can cast with this leader because the 80-pound is tied to my Seaguar Threadlock mainline with an FG knot, which slides smoothly through even the smallest guides on my St. Croix muskie rods."

When using small lures, he goes with something tougher. "I use some baits that are smaller than 8 inches," he says. "Tubes, Bull Dawgs, swim-baits, and anything under 8 inches seems to get bit toward the head. They bite larger lures from the side, but for those under 8 inches long, I use 100-pound fluoro above 4 inches of 174-pound wire, tied with an Albright knot."

For guests, he uses 18 to 20 inches of 130-pound fluorocarbon or 174-pound Berkley Sevenstrand Wire. "That's the right length for a figure-eight," Herbeck says. "I tie a Mustad swivel to one end and a Mustad snap at the other with a loop knot to give the clip room to swing, particularly important with tubes. I tie my own knots with wire, an over-hand knot into a half hitch with 7 or 8 barrel wraps up the line and Sevenstrand has never failed, from 18- to 170-pound wire. My rule is, wire for dark water, fluorocarbon for clear water. I always use a doubled line to tie the knot connecting the swivel to the mainline. Creating 4 feet of doubled line with a spider hitch has saved me big fish over the years because braid can be nicked easily when you snap a jig or a jerk-bait across rocks."

COMMERCIAL Leaders



MOTOR CITY CONNECTIONS

Don Miller, owner of Motor City Muskies Charter Service, put his clients on 383 Lake St. Clair muskies up to 38 pounds in 2014 and did even better last year. St. Clair is famous for its massive flats where trolling beckons, so Miller knows the value of sturdy long leaders. "I tie 6- to 8-foot leaders using 80-pound test Seaguar Premier Fluorocarbon. Our catch rates increase about 30 percent when we use fluoro instead of wire or

100-pound mono. But if I pull a sentimental bait that's caught a lot of fish, I use 100-pound mono because there's a 99-percent chance I won't lose it. I use 100- to 140-pound Sampo swivels and snaps because their welded split rings never fail.

Miller uses a Trilene Knot to make connections with fluorocarbon and monofilament. "After thousands of muskies, we haven't had that knot break," he says. "I've had lines break, but never a Trilene Knot. I use Sampo Coastlock Snaps with no bearings for

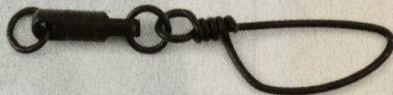
QUALITY Components



Berkley 150-pound
Ball Bearing Swivel



Offshore Angler
Aussie Snap Swivel



Bass Pro Shops 100-
pound Pro-Qualifier
Ball Bearing Swivel



SPRO 200-
pound Ball
Bearing Swivel



Berkley Ball
Bearing Swivel



SPRO 165-pound
Ball Bearing Swivel



Berkley 80-pound
Cross-Lok Snap Swivel



Berkley
Sevenstrand
Standard Sleeves



Berkley 100-pound
Cross-Lok Snap



body baits, but when trolling highly resistant, rotating baits like Musky Mayhem Double Cowgirls you need an inverted leader. I put a standard Coastlock Snap by the weight and two ball-bearing snap swivels at the bait to keep those big blades from twisting my line and creating a weak spot."

He uses in-line weights with ball bearings on each end to further reduce twist. They're clipped to the end of the long leader and tied to the mainline on the other end. "Some people use clip-on weights way up the line, but you can create slack and lose fish each while unclipping them, so I prefer in-line weights. My

mainline is Berkley Trilene Big Game 40-pound mono, though I also use Cortland lines."

Miller chooses the thickness of his leader material based on conditions. "I generally use 60- to 80-pound test, 80- mostly. It's a little more forgiving. But when it's calm and bright, and the water's clear, I drop to 60- and get more strikes. And I have no problem with 100-pound test fluoro. If it gets nicked, you can still land that fish. I generally use 6- to 8-foot leaders, giving a muskie less to see that doesn't belong there."

Another trolling master, Jody Mills of Mills Musky Guide

Service, plies his trade across the vast expanses of Georgian Bay, which covers almost the entire eastern half of Lake Huron. While Lake St. Clair muskies get big, Georgian Bay fish are dragons. "After all these years, I still make my own leaders, Mills says. "I use 90-pound Berkley Sevalon, which is nylon-coated Sevenstrand leader material with ultra-high quality 150-pound Sampo swivels and snaps, double crimped at each end and a special self tightening loop at each end. It's four feet of pure quality. You can't afford anything less on world-record water. Nylon-coated wire protects the fish when they roll up on it. I make my casting leaders 10 to 12 inches long with 119-pound, nylon-coated, single strand brown Sevalon, with 80- to 100-pound Sampo snaps and ball-bearing swivels. Brown wire doesn't reflect light."

TUBE TIES

Marc Arena owns Red October Baits, specializing in muskie tubes. "Owning this company, I use monster tubes more than anything," Arena says. "With the many applications tubes are suited for, leader material and length are an important consideration. Top-end components are a given, for your mental health and the physical health of muskies you hook."

He's dialed into muskie movements in clear river systems around the Great Lakes. "Jigging tubes around reefs covered with zebra and quagga mussels makes fluoro and monofilament leaders poor choices. Their shells are incredibly sharp and make quick work of these materials. For that reason I make my jigging leaders in the 18- to 24-inch range. This protects the braided mainline as the tube bounces around structure. Single-strand stainless is the best choice. Seven-strand wire tends to fatigue in short order.

"I've tried titanium, but the continual shock it experiences from hooksets into logs and boulders causes it to eventually snap at either the top or bottom loop of the leader. Single-strand American Fishing Wire in .041 or .043 diameter has proven to hold up to the grind of jigging the bottom of the St. Lawrence, Niagara, and other big rivers. I twist the wire to make connections. With that gauge of wire, once through and three tight wraps is plenty. I go through a 1/4-pound coil in two seasons."

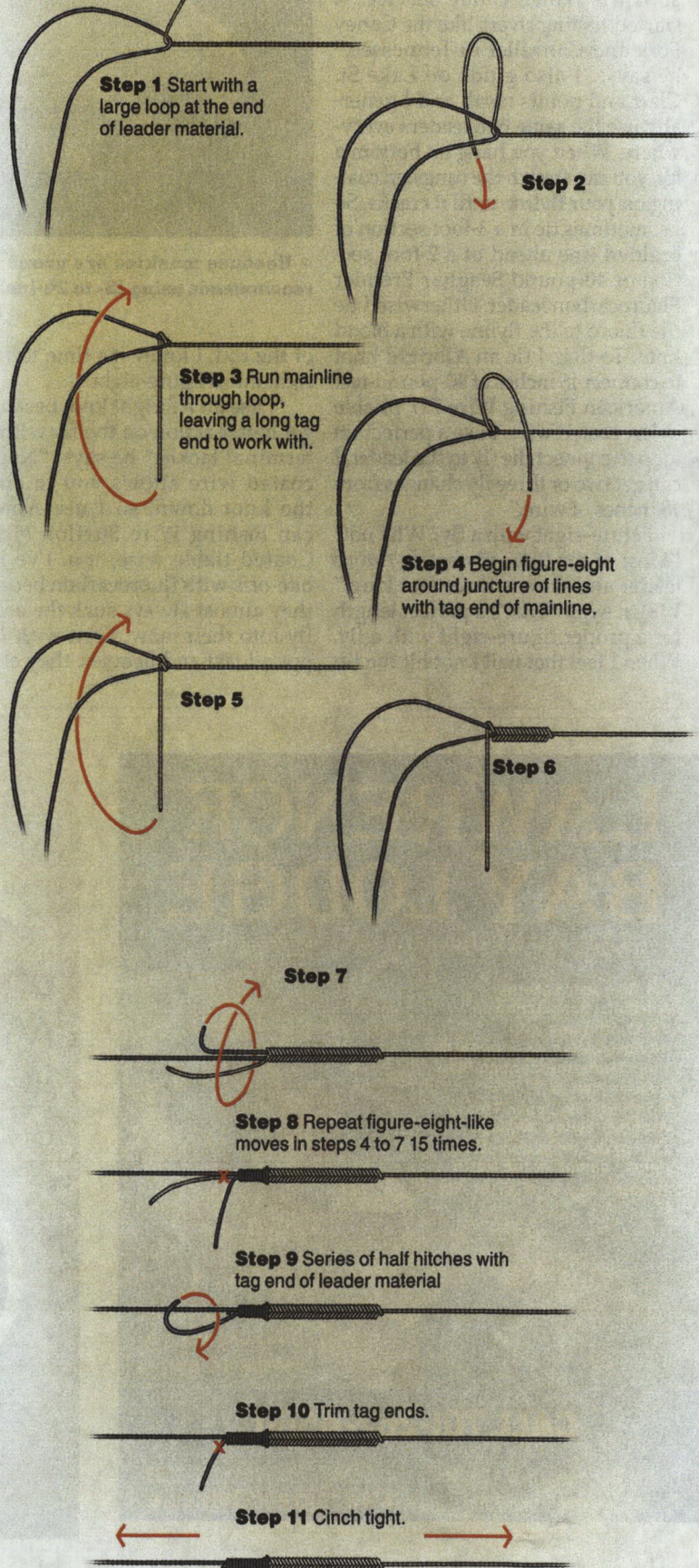
When casting, Arena throws 10- to 12-inch tubes mostly. "Even a 10-inch monster tube is on the small side for muskies" he says. "Add to that the collapsible nature of a hollow-bodied soft plastic, and it makes it easy for decent-size muskies or pike to fully engulf the bait, putting teeth directly on the leader. I've witnessed clean bite-offs with fluorocarbon. Single-strand wire also helps achieve a darting, erratic action, the advantage tubes have over other soft plastics. I like the direct and immediate response you get with single-strand. It enhances sharp movements. I'd have a hard time being convinced pike and muskies are leader-shy, compared to other species."

Bruce Shumway of Shumway's Musky Guide Service in Wisconsin ties casting leaders of brown, single-strand 174-pound-test American Fishing Wire (.029 diameter) for clients casting his Bunny Bou, Funky Chicken, and other Shumway baits. "Single-strand wire has performed great over the years," he says. "I use black 200-pound American Fishing Wire Crane swivels and Berkley Stay-Lok Swivels, which can't fail if closed correctly. I tie leaders with a haywire twist using a needle-nose pliers. It's easy to tie in the field. My casting leaders are 8 to 10 inches long. In clear water I use 130-pound fluoro and I'd suggest never going lighter for big toothy fish. I use a 1½-inch knot. Wet it and use a steady, slow pull with pliers and a drop of Super Glue to make sure it never backs up."

Johnny Dadson, owner of Dadson Blade Baits, now sells the custom leaders he's been using. "They come in a 10-inch size for casting and 36- and 48-inch versions for trolling," he says. "Constructed with 130-pound fluorocarbon and 200-pound test brass ball-bearing swivels, the leaders end with a Stay-Lok snap. They have small Colorado blades for added attraction and vibration. They've had five full seasons of rigorous testing and been proven by many 40-plus pound muskies."

I also use commercial ties from Stealth Tackle, SPRO, Eagle Claw, and Terminator. Small-diameter leaders with small snaps are crucial for the early bite on small suspending baits. A Lucky Craft Pointer 128 or #12 Rapala X-Rap takes many an early muskie up north. Snaps too large and leaders too heavy overpower these small subtle baits.

THE FG Knot



FLYING HIGH

Chris Willen has been guiding fly fishermen to muskies since 2007 at Chris Willen Guide Service. "I started fishing rivers like the Caney Fork and Calfkiller in Tennessee," he says. "I also guide on Lake St. Clair and points north and I generally use the same two leaders everywhere. When you hang on bottom a lot, you can stretch the tungsten coating on your flyline until it cracks. So I sometimes tie in a 3-foot section of braided line ahead of a 2-foot section of 40-pound Seaguar Premier Fluorocarbon leader. Otherwise I tie the fluoro to the flyline with a blood knot. To that, I tie an Albright knot to connect 18 inches of 40-pound-test American Fishing Wire 7x7 pliable nylon-coated wire. I use a perfection loop to connect the fly to the leader. I can get two or three fly changes from 18 inches of wire."

Figure-eight with a fly? Why not? "Most of the time, my entire fluoro leader and wire is three feet long," Willen says. "That's a perfect length for a proper figure-eight with a fly. When I feel that nail knot hit the tip



> Because muskies are prone to swallow big tube baits, Marc Arena recommends using 18- to 24-inch single-strand steel leaders with them.

of the rod, I know it's time to flow right into a figure-eight.

"I use an Albright knot because I get better action on the fly without terminal tackle," he says. "Nylon-coated wire allows you to cinch the knot down, so I use American Fishing Wire Surflon Nylon Coated tiable wire, too. I've had bite-offs with fluorocarbon because they almost always suck the entire fly into their maw. Even with 100-pound test and heavier, they chew

on the leader all the way to the boat."

Nothing is worse. Broken connections break hearts when that giant disappears into the depths. No sense making yourself sick when you have potent options like those described by our panel of experts. Happy days ahead. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Matt Straw, Brainerd, Minnesota, has been contributing to *In-Fisherman* publications for almost 30 years.