

Fish

Logically



This big musky found a white Pounder Bull Dawg too much to resist.



By Spencer Berman

What is the best lure in your tackle box? Is there a “magic” lure? What will get that big fish to finally open its mouth? These questions are all commonly asked by musky fishermen on a daily basis and I try to answer them for myself every day I am on the water.

Legendary musky fisherman Steve Herbeck once told me “Your best weapon in fishing is not in your tackle box. It’s between your ears.” At the time it seemed like merely a bumper sticker slogan or pep talk. After a while, however, it began to hit me how true that statement was. I’ve since learned that if you fish logically, you will have much more success.

Lake Rundown

The first and most basic part of fishing logically is to look at how the lake you will be fishing lays out, and thus determine the day-in, day-out best way to target the fish there. In order to demonstrate this, let’s look at two very popular and relatively similar lakes to contrast, Lake Mille Lacs in Minnesota and Lake St. Clair on the Michigan-Ontario border.

Although these lakes are very similar in size, both well over 100,000 acres, we see that two very distinct and different cultures have emerged. On Lake St. Clair, more anglers troll and believe that trolling is the best way to catch muskies. Mille Lacs, on the other hand, has a culture that is mainly casting-based, and thinks casting is the only fair way to go after muskies. Who is right? They both are!

Despite the similarity in size, these lakes have a couple of very important differences in their key features which have led to these diverse tactics emerging. First, the number of muskies in Lake St. Clair, even post-VHS, is still by far the highest musky population for a lake its size with around one fish per acre. Mille Lacs, on the other hand, has a very, very low musky density, somewhere around one fish every 15 to 20 acres. Second is the abundance of structure. Lake St. Clair has a lot of weeds in it but there are few contours for baitfish and muskies to relate. Mille Lacs, on the other hand, has a fair amount of structure and depth contours. The last major difference is depth — although Mille Lacs is generally shallow for a lake its size, it is still deep enough that the fish can spread out in the water column, which does not allow for any one bait’s running depth to cover the whole water column. St. Clair, on the other hand, averages around 11 feet deep and gives anglers the distinct advantage of being able to troll a lure two to four feet down and still contact every fish.

A logical analysis can help you decide how and where you should fish before you even launch your boat

These characteristics on St. Clair make for a lake where, due to a lack of structure, muskies roam the basins with a very high degree of mobility. Since the number of muskies is high, they are able to keep baitfish numbers low, thus forcing the fish to be very opportunistic about when they eat. This leads to anglers catching a much higher number of fish, thus helping to pattern the muskies more easily and effectively. Lastly, due to the shallowness of the lake, the entire water column can be covered easily by keeping your baits high in the water column. This lack of deep water in a lake allows the extremely large fish, which in deeper lakes would often position below where our lures run, to stay well within reach of our baits at all times. Thus, the biggest 5 percent of the fish in the population are caught much more often than in most other systems of this size. All of this adds up to a fishery that requires you to cover water in order to catch the moving fish, all the while keeping as many baits in play as possible, equaling the trolling mentality.

The characteristics of Lake Mille Lacs, on the other hand, add up very differently. Due to the low number of fish and the higher number of baitfish, muskies can be much more selective about when they eat. This makes simply putting a lure in front of a musky not the only requirement to get them to eat. Rather, it is more about getting the right lure in front of the right fish at the right time. Also, because of the low population and the selectiveness of the fish, anglers are forced to target areas where large populations of fish are concentrated on one spot and then pick it apart completely. Next, Mille Lacs has a decent abundance of large structure, normally rock reefs, which give muskies places to congregate. Therefore, there is very limited open-water roaming by the fish. Due to these features, we see the prominent tactic on Mille Lacs becoming casting on or just off of structures, where fish are, hopefully, congregating.

It may be tempting to say: “Why should I care? I don’t fish those lakes.” No matter what, the same principles can be applied to any lake to determine if you should be casting vs. trolling, fishing open water or weed edges, or if your desire for numbers of fish or trophy potential means you should be fishing it in the first place. As long as you do your homework and look at the lake features and how they favor the angler, you should be able to use a logical method to determine the best way to catch fish.

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from catching more and bigger fish is the anglers themselves. Too many try to force their favorite pattern on the fish, rather than logically processing the information the fish and the environmental signals are giving them. All fishermen have methods they like and are good at, but we need to remember muskies do not care how we like to catch them.

For example, it is common knowledge that after the first couple major cool downs in September muskies normally slide en masse into very skinny water. If you are a person who only likes to fish open water or weed edges you are going to need to leave your comfort zone and try to fish some sand flats or inside weed edges. The way that I tell my clients to look at it is: if you were in a tournament, what would you be doing to win? If that answer is not the same as what you are doing now, then you have to seriously ask yourself if you'd rather catch a fish or two doing what you like to do, or would you rather catch a bunch doing something different. Remember, the reason you like to catch fish using one method over another is probably because you have had success and, therefore, confidence doing so.

Another area where anglers sell themselves short is the spots they fish. So many simply go fishing every Saturday

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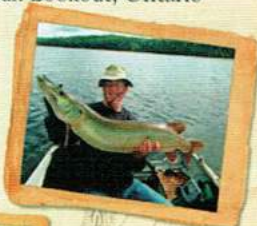




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on the same five to 10 weedlines or rock bars and then return home. The next weekend they do the same thing. This concept can stop you from developing logical solutions to the ever-changing musky equation. Instead, you need to factor such things as weather, wind direction for the last couple days, fishing and boating pressure, your past history, and the seasonal conditions.

One thing that I hear all the time is "Guides only catch so many fish because they fish everyday." I agree that guides have a lot more chances to catch fish since we are on the water so often. It comes as no surprise that at the end of the year guides normally have a lot more fish in their boats than average anglers. However, what few take into account is that good guides also average a lot more fish per day on the water than other anglers. In my opinion, the biggest difference is our willingness to try new spots and techniques. It is understandable that if you only get 8 to 10 hours on the water each week it is hard to spend two hours trying something new and unproven. However, if you don't you will inevitably end up settling for marginal success. The advantage guides have is that due to their abundant time on the water, they are forced to always be trying new spots and techniques. By doing this, guides are constantly expanding their arsenal by learning new spots and techniques, as well as eliminating spots and tactics that simply don't produce. When you do this you will find that each time on the water you will be able to use the conditions and features of the lake to determine a pattern much more easily. As you begin to have success in these new spots or techniques you will become more comfortable with them.

Another advantage is that the new spots you find will be much more off the beaten path and thus will have fish on them which see fewer baits than "community" spots. The fish that live there will be more likely to actually eat a bait rather than just follow it to the boat.

The final area where anglers are stubborn is their unwillingness to night fish during the summer. I wish that muskies would only eat during the day but this just isn't the case. If you want to catch a big fish in a clear water system in the United States, the summer night bite will normally be your best chance. The reason? First, when the water gets hot, fish become more nocturnal because they find cooler water temperatures at night. Second, the fish in these systems have often been caught by baits during the day, so presenting them at night when they don't see many lures — and can't see them as well — will increase your odds of catching the bigger, smarter fish.

Having said all that, I would like to make it clear that you can still catch fish during the day. However, when you logically annualize musky fishing results over the last couple years you will realize that there is a very disproportional amount of big fish being caught after dark and it would be in your best interest to give night fishing a chance.

The Stampede Effect

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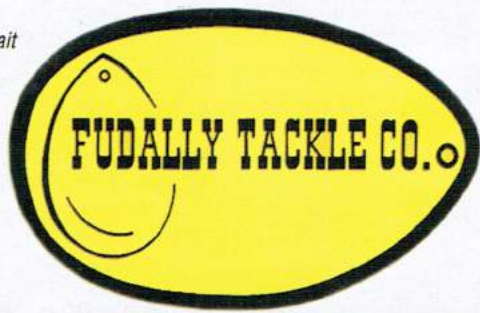


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what I have termed "the stampede effect." Once word gets out that a lake is hot, scores of fishermen rush to the lake to take advantage of this. By then, the bite is usually over. The way these things normally happen is that the weather lines up extremely well for a couple days and the fish start hitting. After two to three days of hot fishing, the bite begins to be talked about on the Internet message boards or amongst friends via calls and texts. A lot of people start hearing about the hot bite and then they begin showing up, usually four to seven days after it started. Unfortunately, how many hot bites do you know in musky fishing go gangbusters for more than three or four days?

The solution is very simple. Try to get on the water when you think a hot bite is going to happen, not when it has already taken place. This seems easier said than done. However, if you use a bit of logic, watch the weather closely, and combine that with your knowledge of what triggers fish, it will happen. If you are familiar with a system, remember to always note what weather and moon patterns caused really good bites so that you can be ready when those conditions align again. If you are not familiar with the system, watch for stable weather before fronts, overcast days, mild weather after extremely hot snaps, cool downs, etc. and you could be the person who says to others, "You should have been here last week."

Anglers who don't think on their own condemn themselves to marginal success. If you are able to break away from these trends and logically look at each fishing situation as a whole, you will be able to better assemble the musky puzzle and lead yourself to more and bigger fish.

Spencer Berman guides in Indiana in spring, and in Minnesota in summer and fall, and Lake St. Clair in the late fall. For more about him, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com.



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