

# Hit that Sucker

**Fished correctly,  
livebait can be  
terrific in fall**

By Spencer Berman

**L**ivebait fishing is almost unchanged from what it was several years ago. To some, this tactic is still the brainless activity of dragging a sucker behind your boat while you either cast or while you're anchored on a weedline. However, like every other facet of musky fishing, livebait fishing has tons of room for evolution and improvement. When you consider sucker size, rigs, forage, type of structure, boat control and depth as variable factors rather than set concepts, you'll realize how much can be fine-tuned.

## Rigs

No different than anything else in your musky arsenal, livebait rigs are tools and each one has a particular time or place where it will allow you the best chance of putting fish in your boat. The largest factor for picking a rig is undoubtedly the size suckers you will be using. You must change your rigs' hook size and number depending on the suckers you are going to use. My basic strategy goes like this:

- Suckers 8 to 9 inches and below: single 3/0 treble hook rig;
- Suckers 9 to 14 inches: single 5/0 treble hook equipped

with a slider;  
• Suckers 14  
inches and above: two  
5/0 treble hook rig.

Each rig (see illustration, Page 50) is matched up with these particular suckers for three key principles — sucker dexterity, sucker activity, and hook-up percentage. The trick here is to balance the number and size of your hooks with the rig that does not overpower the sucker. When you use a rig that is too big for your sucker you will have a high hooking percentage, but because the sucker is carrying too much weight it will be less active and die more quickly. On the other hand, if you use a rig that is too small for your bait you will notice that your sucker is quite active in the water and can live exceedingly long, but hooking the fish will be much more difficult.

With any musky presentation there is a chance for losing fish, and livebait fishing is no different. When this happens it is not the rig's or your fault, it is simply the nature of the sport.

Each rig is hooked differently on the sucker. First, the single 3/0 rig for small suckers works best by hooking the sucker either directly behind the head or in the mouth. This concept relies on a musky's nature to grab the head of its prey. In addition, with such small suckers, a legal musky is almost guaranteed to have most, if not all, of the sucker in its mouth upon taking the bait. The single, forward-placed hook should be more than enough to ensure reasonable hooking percentages. With my mid-size sucker rig, I put the 5/0 hook next to or in front of the sucker's dorsal fin. Then, I position the slider in the top of the sucker's month allowing a minimum of slack



between the two hooks. The concept behind this rig is that no matter where a musky bites the sucker it will have either the leader or the hook in its mouth. When you set the hook from an upward angle, the slider will immediately break out of the sucker's mouth, allowing the leader to lever up so the large treble sticks the musky in the top of the jaw. For this rig I tie a small piece of line around the slider hook's shank and leader — rather than tying the slider directly to the leader — so it moves under a small amount of pressure.

For rigging up big suckers I like to

use a double 5/0 hook rig. The first hook, the one positioned midway down the rig, should be attached to the sucker just behind the head. The back hook should be placed either next to or behind the dorsal. Obviously when you use big suckers you are doing it in order to target larger fish. This makes it even more important for the sucker to both act and look natural. Trophy fish have achieved that size for a reason — they have seen lots of baits and have rarely, if ever, fallen for the trick.

### Boat Layout

I always try to maximize my opportunities and when it comes to suckers, that means the number of rigs in the water. Depending on where I am fishing and the number of people in my boat, I use between two and five livebait rods. When running multiple livebait lines the concept of rod placement becomes extremely important for both maximizing musky opportunities and keeping tangles to a minimum. See the illustration on Page 50 of the way I position my rods for fishing livebait.

These layouts are designed to spread out your suckers in a way that allows you to cover the most water while giving you a chance to cast with as little interference as possible. By using suckers in collaboration with casting you further increase your chances for success. Casting allows you to not only cover much more





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water but brings numbers of aggressive, following muskies to your boat.

I like to use a combination of floats and down-lines in my set-ups to give me the best chance for success. Down-lines are great for two primary reasons — they give you the opportunity to catch following fish and allow for none of the resistance that a musky feels when it takes down a large bobber. There are times when fish become spooky and prone to dropping suckers within moments of grabbing them. Under these conditions floats can tip a musky off that something is amiss. For these fish, often located in lakes that receive a lot of livebait fishing pressure, down-rods will dramatically increase the time a fish will hold onto a sucker, thus allowing you enough time to get ready to set the hook.

Floats, on the other hand, have their

own set of advantages over down-rods. First comes the obvious — they allow you to fish a sucker a great distance from the boat. Sometimes muskies, especially big ones, can be spooky and boat-shy. Floating a sucker eliminates this. The other major reason I use floats is

because they keep the sucker stationary. When you find yourself in wind you have the added battle of trying to keep the boat moving at a slow pace for the proper presentation. This normally involves moving the boat in all directions especially reverse, in order to kill speed. During this turmoil a down-line will move with every slight movement of the boat. A float, on the other hand, will move only slightly during side-to-

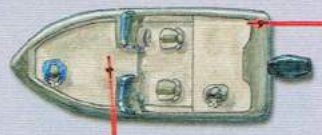
side moves and not at all when headed in reverse.

### Boat Control

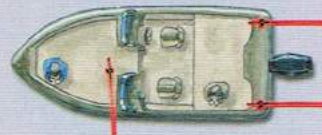
The most important thing to remember when livebait fishing is speed. You need to move slowly. Livebait fishing normally is considered a fall activity and by then the cold water has slowed the muskies' metabolism down to the point where chasing anything down is much less likely.

JIM BORTZ ILLUSTRATIONS

## Sucker Rod Positions



2-rod positioning  
(2 down-rods)



float  
3-rod positioning  
(2 down-rods, 1 float)

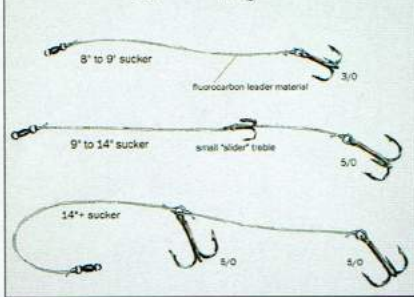


4-rod positioning  
(2 down-rods, 2 floats)



5-rod positioning  
(3 down-rods, 2 floats)

### Sucker Rigs



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Often, moving a bait as slowly as it can be run can still be too fast to entice a strike, leaving you with one option — put something in the water that looks like a dying baitfish no matter how slow it goes.

### Suspended

Livebait can be effective for suspended muskies. In the fall as the weeds die, more fish move to open water, and often they have vacated the upper 10 feet of the water column. As with vertical jigging or trolling (the two fall standbys for open water), livebait fishing allows the angler a chance to put a bait in the strike zone and keep it there 100 percent of the time.

Livebait fishing over open water is not just dragging suckers around aimlessly, because you can effectively use your electronics to locate both baitfish and muskies. When you have found a location in the water column where the muskies are primarily located, it is time to deploy your suckers about two to five feet above where you are seeing good-looking arches on your depthfinder's screen. If you can use multiple lines I would always try different depths until you establish a pattern. If you can't find muskies with your electronics, a good rule of thumb

would be to keep your baits in the upper half of the water column when you are fishing over water less than 30 feet deep, and in the upper third when in water 30 feet or more. These are just guidelines ... if your electronics are indicating something different, do not hesitate to go deeper or shallower.

When you think about it, a sucker is simply a baitfish in distress. Although the tactic seems simple, by putting some additional thought, effort and

energy into your livebait fishing you will inevitably start putting more fish in your boat.

*Spencer Berman operates Spencer's Angling Adventures in Indiana and Minnesota. Visit his Web site at [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com) or call (419) 410-0498.*



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