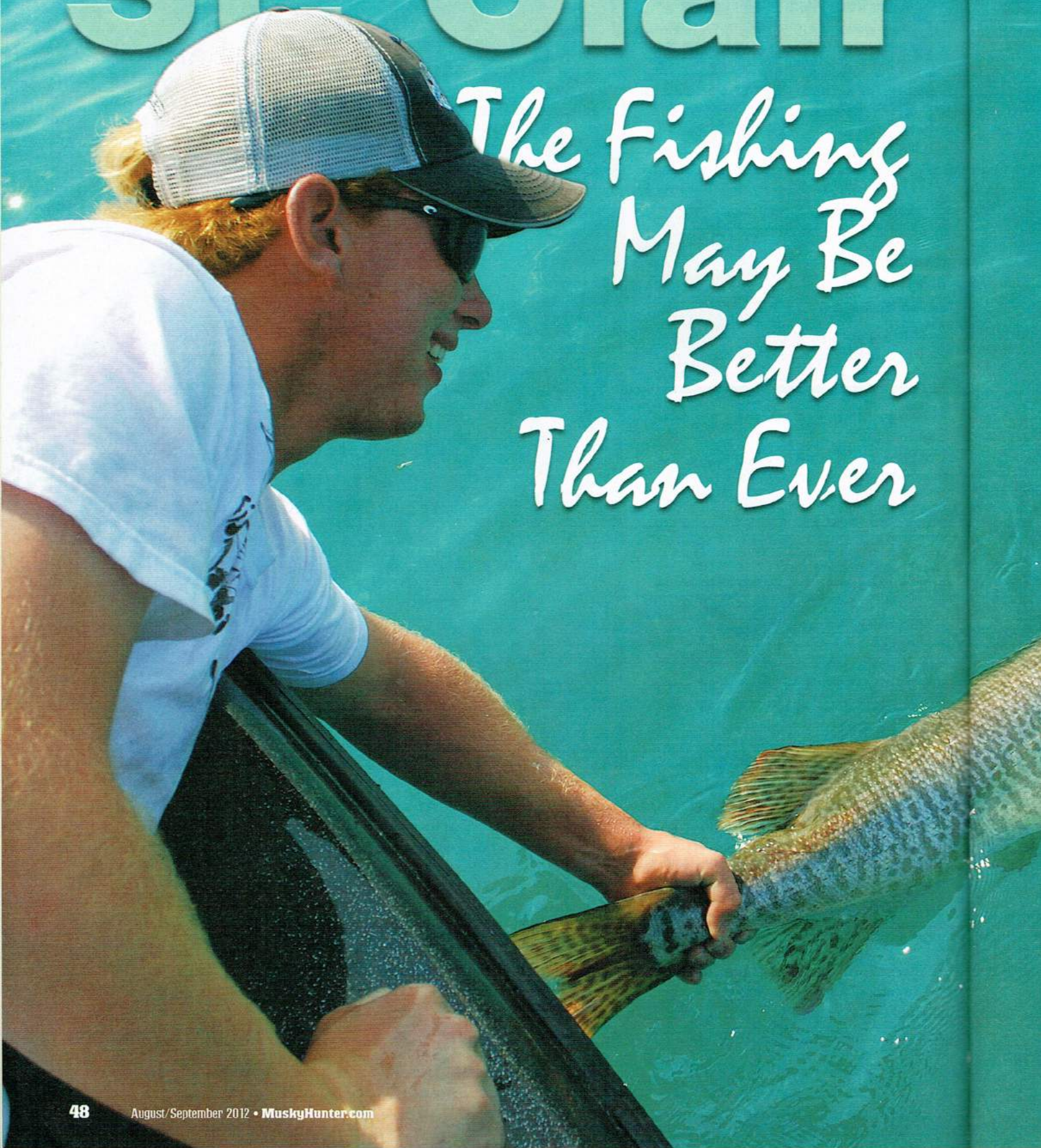


St. Clair

*The Fishing
May Be
Better
Than Ever*



A large musky fish is shown swimming in clear, greenish water. The fish is positioned on the left side of the page, facing right. Its body is long and tapers towards the tail, with a pattern of dark spots and stripes along its side. The water is a vibrant green color, and the lighting creates a shimmering effect on the fish's scales.

By Spencer Berman, Contributing Writer

In the first of this 2-part series, we focused on how changes over the past 60 years have affected Lake St. Clair, its musky population and the forage base. These changes have affected musky fishing on Lake St. Clair, and successful anglers have had to adapt. Though this article focuses on Lake St. Clair, many of these concepts may apply on your local lakes.

As is only appropriate for Lake St. Clair, we will split up the fishing into two different categories — trolling and casting.

Trolling

As most of you are aware, most of the trollers on St. Clair employ a mast planer board system. This allows anglers to spread out their lines much more effectively than with in-line boards, as well as allowing them to troll in much bigger waves and at much higher speeds. That concept remains unchanged on Lake St. Clair and if you are planning to go out to strictly troll, you simply cannot beat a mast system. On the flip side, speed is the one area we have seen major changes.

Lake St. Clair used to be easy to troll for one very simple reason — the fish were extremely hungry. Due to a less-than-desirable amount of forage, muskies were forced to be extremely opportunistic in their feeding. This basically meant that as long as you put a bait over fish, they would eat it. For this reason the lake developed a high speed trolling method of fishing with most boats going in the neighborhood of 5 mph (if not higher).

However, on today's Lake St. Clair high speed is rarely the best choice. If you are looking to produce numbers of fish on the lake these high-speed trolling tactics are not a bad choice, especially in the middle of summer when the water is warm. However, most days you will find it very difficult to find quality fish doing these kinds of speeds. Today's St. Clair monsters generally seem to prefer baits being trolled in the 3.5 to 4.0 mph range. In addition to this being my opinion, I spoke with Captain Jason Quintano, a good friend and owner and operator of Fins and Grins Musky Charters. He is also the winner of both the Muskie Bash Classic and the Big Show Shootout, two of the largest trolling tournaments on Lake St. Clair last year.

Says Quintano: "My optimal trolling speeds on Lake St. Clair last year were between 3.4 to 4.0 mph, but generally I keep it right around 3.8 mph. This will not only allow you to catch good numbers of muskies but also big fish as well."

It seems that since the muskies are so much better-fed today they are not forced to simply eat whenever they see food. In my opinion, this is why slowing down and force-feeding them a bit more is so successful, especially for the larger, smarter fish which tend to be far less suicidal.

St. Clair


Having said all of that, do not be afraid to kick up the speed some days in the summer when fishing is tough and you are not getting bites. As you know, the only rule in musky fishing is that there are no rules. Slower speeds are simply a guideline; you always need to pattern the fish for the day you are on the water.

There have also been major changes in the lures used for trolling. In the past, mainly smaller, jointed crankbaits were at the forefront. Today this is far from the case. Although jointed crankbaits still catch muskies, the majority of the larger fish today are coming on straight crankbaits and bucktails. Crankbaits such as Muskie Train's MX6 and Donatos Custom Lures 6-inch Enforcer have been top choices. As for bucktails, Spanky's and Double Cowgirls always seem to lead the way. The much cleaner water, in addition to the slower speeds, seem to make the flash of the bucktails and the slower wobble of the straight crankbaits perfect for big fish and numbers.

Quintano agrees. "The big fish bait right now on St. Clair is a bucktail. Don't get me wrong, we do well on crankbaits but bucktails seem to be what's putting the big fish in the boat day in and day out for us trollers," he said. "I prefer to run smaller bucktails in the early season and then, as the season progresses, the bigger bucktails with double 10s are always in the set."







A Pounder proved irresistible to this 53-inch Lake St. Clair giant for author Spencer Berman.



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Casting

The rather interesting part of casting on Lake St. Clair is that the concept is fairly new. Granted, there were a few guys out there casting a decade ago, but for the most part the casting approach is the new kid on the block. Despite the new stature, casting anglers have posted some monster catches. These big fish catches have given casting massive credibility and attention on St. Clair. However, due to the lake's complete lack of any distinguishable structure, casting can appear to be the proverbial needle in a haystack. Despite this, once you get it dialed in, 10-plus fish days are not only achievable, but actually common.

The first major thing to look for are weeds. Lake St. Clair is pretty much completely surrounded with a variety of different weeds. When you are targeting shallow weeds, growing in depths of less than seven feet, there are a couple things to consider. First of all is cabbage. The lake is full of milfoil, grass and cabbage, and all of these weeds can hold fish. However, hands down, the cabbage beds hold the most and biggest. Normally, a good rule of thumb is to search the weedbeds for stretches of cabbage. Mark these with waypoints, and then

come back to these areas and fish them thoroughly. It is important to keep in mind that due to the extremely shallow depth of Lake St. Clair, just because you see a weedline between you and shore does not mean there won't be weeds to the outside — between you and open water, as well. Always look for additional weed growth on either side of your current position.

The next major structural items you can target on the water are the sand breaks. Although they do not seem all too steep, generally only one to two feet, these sand breaks actually make up a large depth change in a lake with so little contour. In addition, normally on the bottom of the sand breaks you will find a small edge of cabbage. These cabbage edges are almost always loaded with big fish. Luckily for anglers, these sand edges are normally fairly well marked and easy to find on your map or GPS.

Another major structural item is the channel edge. Most of you have probably heard how amazing these deep river channel edges are in the fall, but they also hold fish in the summer. Once again, target areas with good weed edges, preferably cabbage. Also, due to the extremely fast-moving current, it is often a good idea to work baits deeper down the edges. By letting your baits sink down the edge a bit, it will help to get them in front of fish that are lying near bottom. Normally the fish in these channels have been driven down by the current, so if the fish are off the weed edges this tactic will work great.

The last major casting area for anglers to target is open water. "Open water" on a lake as large as Lake St. Clair's roughly 270,000 acres may seem an impossible task, but it is not. When you consider that the two primary forage fish on the lake for muskies are shad and perch, species that spend the majority of their adult life in open water, it only makes sense that these open water areas would be key casting locations.

Normally when I look for open water areas I seek one of three things

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— baitfish, weeds or muskies. Baitfish in a lake as shallow as this are rather hard to see on a graph below you, due to the small sonar cone size and spooky nature of baitfish around the boat. Side imaging, on the other hand, is extremely useful and allows you to see baitfish on either side of you without being over top of them. By using side imaging you can look for areas on the lake that consistently hold baitfish.

Weed areas in open water typically do not grow all the way to the surface but will normally grow in patches two to five feet off the bottom. These weeds almost always hold both numbers of muskies as well as some of the largest fish.

The last thing you should be looking for, and this goes for any of the tactics discussed above, are muskies. Whenever you see, hook, or catch a musky, you should always immediately waypoint the spot. These fish tend to run in packs and where there is one there are almost always more, even if you cannot see any reason that fish would be there in the first place. A good rule of thumb is to waypoint any muskies contacted and then fish that area for a while to see if there are any others.

Lures

When it comes to casting lures on Lake St. Clair, there is one major factor to consider: are you casting in areas used by trollers? Trollers typically use only two types of lures — crankbaits and bucktails — and they can only make the lures go in a straight line. For that reason when I am fishing where a lot of trolling boats are working, I almost never use bucktails or crankbaits, and instead go with lures to which I can impart action. In my opinion, there is no better lure for that than a Bull Dawg.

A Bull Dawg is a caster's dream for St. Clair simply because it allows you to impart so much action, all of which the trollers' straight-running lures cannot duplicate. Also, it gets down roughly two to five feet, which allows you to both work it over weeds and,

when needed, it can get be fished deeper when you are in open water. I prefer to give my Bull Dawgs lots of stopping and starting, up-down and left-right action by doing a lot of hard rips with my rod in every direction. In the summer it normally works best to be extremely aggressive with your Bull Dawgs in order to trigger fish that have normally seen most baits going in a straight line. On the other hand, in early June and the fall, normally long, slow pulls work better for the slightly-slower metabolic rates of colder water muskies.

Other baits which seem to work well are gliders, such as Hellhounds and Softail Phantoms, in addition to jerk-baits like the classic weighted Suick.

When you are casting in the shallow weedy areas of the lake you will not have to worry about the trollers having already given the muskies a chance to hit their bucktails. For that reason I tend to throw a lot of Double Cowgirls in these areas. As a bonus, these baits ride perfectly over the high-growing weeds making them, easily, the best choice for this type of fishing on St. Clair. I have also found that speed is often a primary trigger for bucktails on St. Clair and I almost always use a high-speed reel to trigger strikes.

Lake St. Clair is one of those few lakes that seems to have it all. It is extremely large with a lot of different fish-catching options. You can troll, cast or jig and all of these tactics give you a chance at catching great numbers of muskies as well as some monster fish. With more than 200,000 muskies in the lake, many of them breaking the 50-inch barrier, there are more than enough fish to make your fishing experience unforgettable.

Captain Spencer Berman fishes the musky waters of Indiana as well as Lake St. Clair. For more about Spencer, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com



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