

Blambed!

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

There is a belief in musky fishing you will catch fish every day on the water. People watch TV shows and guides' posts on social media and fishing forums and think they are always "smashing" fish. I'm here to tell you it's not what it seems.

What many don't realize is the days you're hearing about are normally the best a guide had on the water all year, out of hundreds of days. Further, the constant action and fish catches portrayed by TV shows are often the result of two long days (or more) on the water, condensed to roughly 21 minutes of actual airtime.

The bottom line is muskies are a top of the food chain species, which means their numbers are the lowest of any target species in nearly every water in which they are found. Combine such low densities with their notoriously frustrating personalities and extreme volatility, and musky fishing will produce more slow days on the water than anything else.

Tournaments

One incredible source of information that truly demonstrates the real musky fishing picture is tournament data. In a tournament, you place lots of anglers on the same water in the same conditions. The anglers inevitably end up trying all sorts of different tactics and techniques, and then are forced to report back at the end and provide truthful information.

A great example of this is the Professional Musky Tournament Trail (PMTT), which consists of four tournaments

throughout the year on some of the best musky waters in the country. The format features a full day on the water Saturday and a half day Sunday, with 2-man teams. When you look at the PMTT's numbers over the last three years, you see the following statistics:

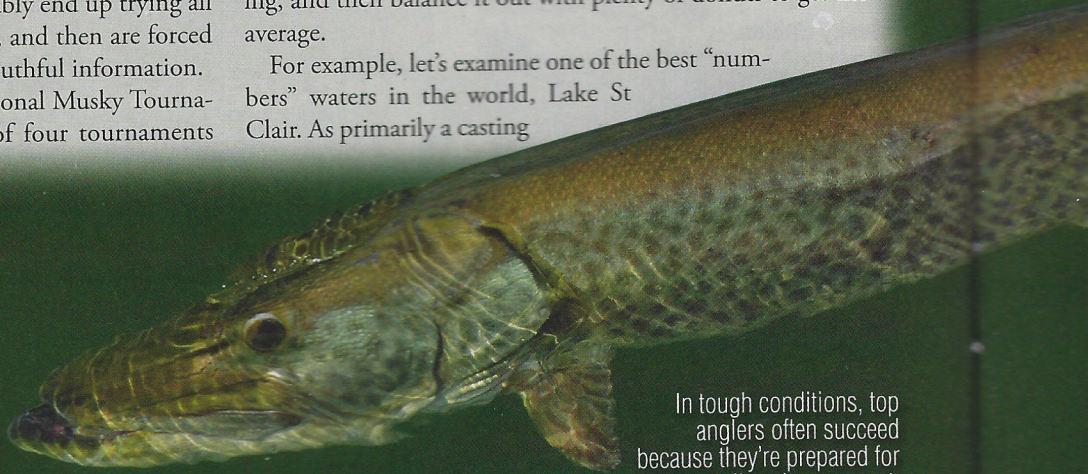
- Only a 43 percent chance of a musky being landed per team per tournament.
- Only a 21.5 percent chance of each angler catching a fish in each tournament.
- Only a 0.5 percent chance of each angler catching a 50-plus-inch fish in each tournament.

When you convert these percentages into days on the water, you end up with only one musky caught for every seven days of fishing, and one 50-plus-inch fish caught every 300 days on the water. These stats really help illustrate how musky fishing is far from a cakewalk even for some extremely good tournament anglers.

True Numbers

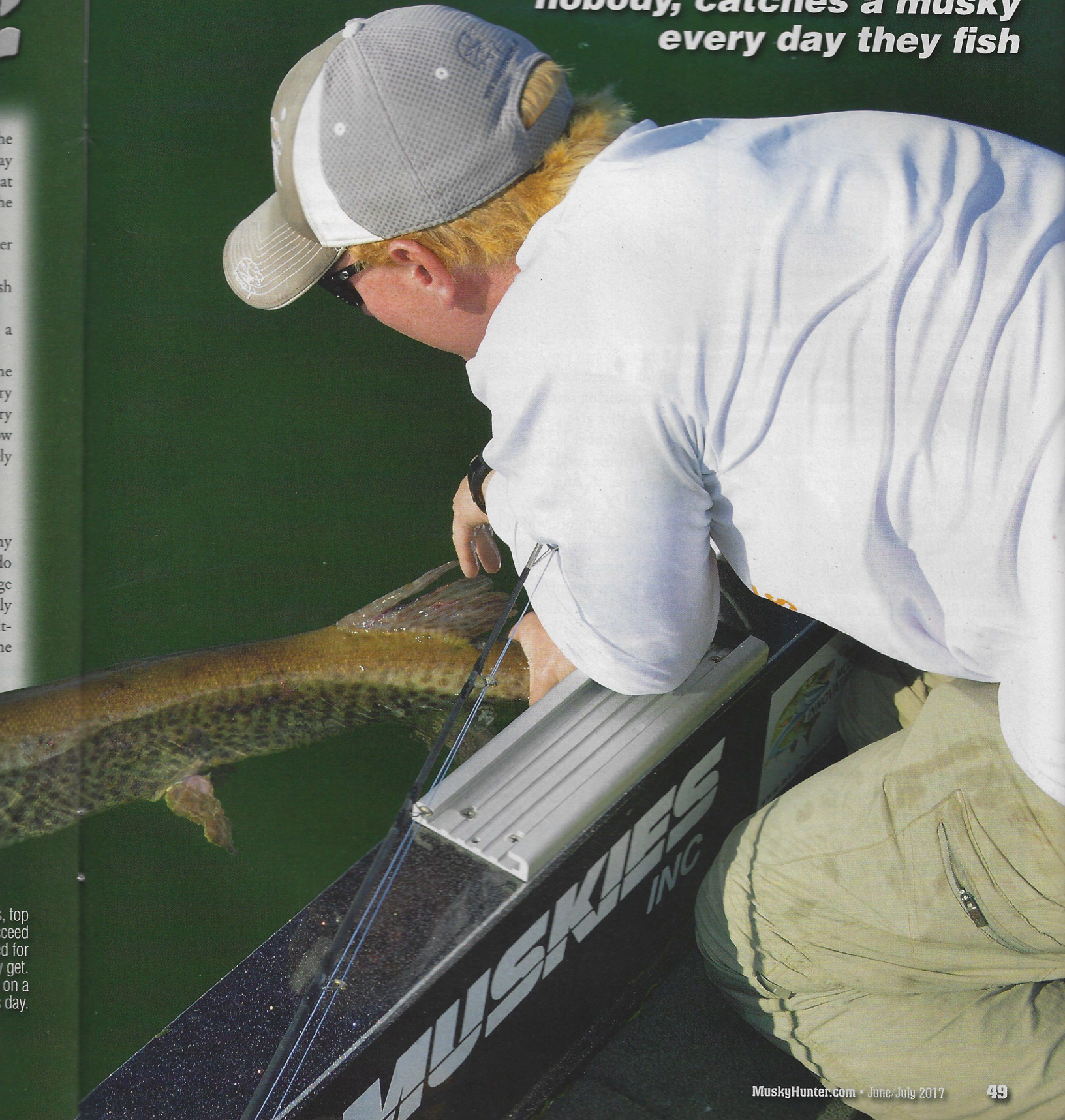
When we look around the musky world, there are many lakes where the best anglers, guides or weekend warriors do not average a fish in the boat every day. The guys who average over one fish a day in the boat on their home waters normally do so by racking up large number days when the fish are biting, and then balance it out with plenty of donuts to get the average.

For example, let's examine one of the best "numbers" waters in the world, Lake St Clair. As primarily a casting



In tough conditions, top anglers often succeed because they're prepared for the few strikes they may get. Here, the author releases a 53-incher caught on a Pounder BullDawg on a flat-calm, windless day.

Nobody, and we mean nobody, catches a musky every day they fish



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guide on St. Clair, I am normally lucky to average 4.5 to five muskies per day in my boat during the season. This will include an average of around 12 to 20 days with at least 10 muskies in the boat, with the best day for the year amounting to between 17 to 22 fish. When you take those double-digit days out of the equation, this average plummets to only 2.7 to 2.9 fish for the remaining days. Since my boat normally contains myself and two clients, you need to further divide those numbers by three to get your individual chance of catching a musky on an average day.

On the other end of the spectrum, let's look at some of the lower musky density lakes which also have some of the highest growth potentials in the world. Places like Mille Lacs Lake in Minnesota and the St. Lawrence River, which splits New York and Ontario, produce giant muskies every year. When you really look at these fisheries you will see that they are far from kind to fishermen. In fact, it is common for the best anglers on either of these waters to spend more than 10 days without a single fish in the boat. Add to that the number of anglers on the boat at a time (normally three in a guide's boat) and the average is less than one fish per every 30 days on the water. Although these places produce a lot of 50- and 55-plus-inchers, there are also plenty of smaller fish mixed in, so the 30 days per fish doesn't just mean 30 days per giant. It means 30 days per musky, maybe a 38-incher, maybe a 50-pounder.

In addition to each individual lake having its own averages, you will also see the conditions having a massive impact

Tips for Tough Fishing

- Don't fish too many spots. "Camp out" on high percentage water.
- Keep high percentage lures on your line and don't change.
- Use your electronics to dial in locations if the fish refuse to show themselves.
- Slow down your presentations.
- Locate baitfish. Even on tough days muskies will be near their food.
- Check the sharpness of your hooks. Often the bites you get on such days will be more nips than bites.
- Always be ready. Tough conditions can lull you to sleep. You are not going to get many chances, so make sure you are ready.
- Do great figure-8's. Often it will take the added effort of the figure-8 to trigger lethargic fish.

— Spencer Berman

on the fishing. When you have good conditions you can see lower number lakes suddenly producing several fish per boat on the water that given day. At the same time, higher number lakes will see huge averages when the conditions are right.

For example, in August of 2015, the PMTT held a tournament on Minnesota's Lake Vermilion, which is notorious for tough fishing and low numbers, but very big fish. The weather lined up great for the tournament and the fish were snapping. That tournament saw 80 fish landed by roughly 115 2-man teams in the day-and-a-half tournament. These numbers are far above average for the PMTT and certainly not what you would have expected from a low numbers fishery.

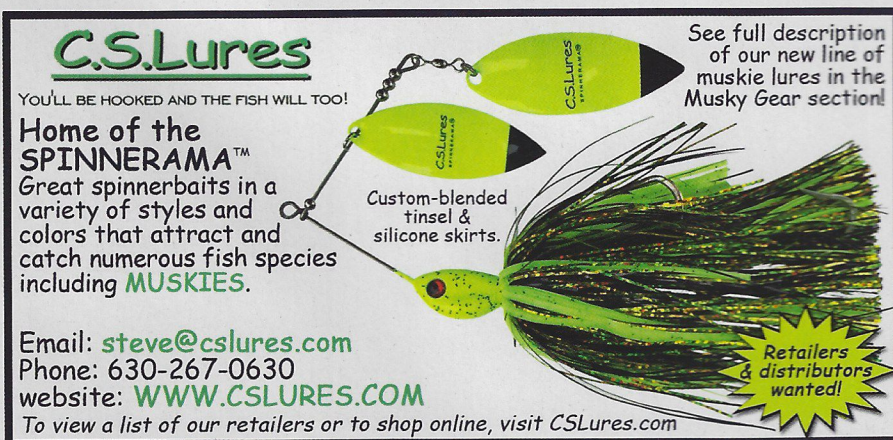
On the other hand, the PMTT held its championship on Lake St. Clair in 2013. Since this is such a great numbers lake and the tournament was being held at what was normally a prime time of the year, the expectations going into the tournament were for record catches with plenty of giant fish. However, the weather was unseasonably warm with high skies and no wind. As a result, there were only 29 muskies caught for 35 boats, and the big fish for the tournament was only 47¾ inches, nowhere near the expectations.

Guide Streaks

One common misnomer in musky fishing is the top guides catch fish every day. Their status as elite anglers combined with their knowledge of the lakes makes them more likely to catch fish on a given day compared to a weekend warrior, but in no way guarantees success. Most guides set up shop on lakes that are not known for numbers of fish but rather on lakes known for trophy fish. There are three major reasons for this.

First of all, as a guide you spend hundreds of days on the water and therefore you are going to catch plenty of muskies. That said, most guides become bored while chasing smaller muskies, and would personally sacrifice lower numbers in exchange for a chance at a bigger fish. The other two reasons are simple business. Most potential clients are not looking to hire a guide to up their chances at catching a 38-incher. (Usually, though, a client will usually be happy to catch a 38-incher on the path to their giant.) Instead, clients want to hire a guide on a trophy fishery to increase their chances at a truly special fish. The final reason is the extreme challenge of such fisheries — their difficult nature makes them more daunting to take on without help, so professional assistance is appealing.

To further illustrate this point, I asked some of the best guides in the industry what their longest fishless streak was, and where it took place. Each of the guides listed below is considered among the most knowledgeable on their water. Often, their bad streaks were associated with extreme weather conditions that



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made for horrible fishing.

Days without a single musky in the boat:

- Spencer Berman of Spencer's Angling Adventures, eight days on Lake Vermilion, Minnesota.

- Luke Ronnestrand of Luke Ronnestrand's Guide Service, nine days on Lake Mille Lacs, Minnesota.

- Chris Taurisano of T Bone Guide Service, five days on the Fox Chain, Illinois.

- Gregg Thomas of Battle the Beast Guide Service, 22 days on Cave Run Lake, Kentucky.

- John Anderson of The Ottawa River Musky Factory, eight days on the Ottawa River, Ontario.

- Tony Grant of Cave Run Guide Service, 14 days on Cave Run Lake, Kentucky.

- Bret Alexander of Alexander's Sport Fishing, 24 days on Green Bay, Wisconsin.

- Jeff Van Remortel of WDH Guide Service, six days in Vilas County, Wisconsin.

- Steve Herbeck, guide at Andy Myers Lodge, 14 days on Eagle Lake, Ontario.

The Bottom Line

Although many of you may find this information depressing and are wondering if my goal was to get you to sell your equipment, nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, this information is intended to make you aware of how musky fishing really plays out. Regardless of how it appears on Facebook, muskies are very tough to catch. No matter who you are, what lake you are on, or what lures you cast, catching muskies is never a guarantee. By keeping these numbers in mind, I hope you can better accept some of your more difficult stretches of musky fishing.

Remember, you are not the only one who has struggled to put a musky in the boat, and you are not always doing something wrong. Muskies are just an annoying, stupid, crazy, sometimes lazy fish that don't care how badly you want them to cooperate.

The next time you fish, keep in mind the hope the conditions are right and the

muskies are easy. If that's not the case, grind it out and use all of your knowledge and determination to try to put a fish in the boat. When you succeed with a giant fish you will be reminded no other fish in fresh water can get your adrenaline pumping like a musky. No other fish is as satisfying to catch and no other fish makes for better fish stories and replica mounts. It is knowledge that al-

lows us to push forward and continue to chase these crazy and difficult fish!

For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com



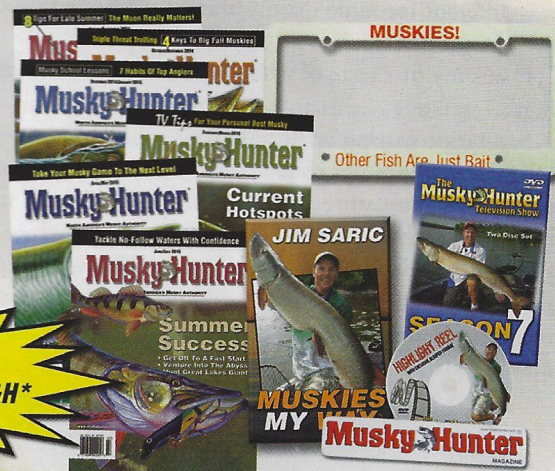
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