

# Boatside Breakdown

## Make the right boatside moves with erratic baits and you may find a giant musky in the bottom of your net

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

I have been chasing muskies nearly all of my life, fishing on some of the best waters in the world. In that time, the one fish that had always eluded me was a 55-incher. I had come close several times and had guided anglers to eight muskies of 55 inches or more, and this led to a joke among my friends that I am a great guide but not such a great fisherman.

Finally, on August 24 last year, I landed a 55¼-incher, the longest fish among Lake St. Clair captains to that point in the year. Although this fish ended up being a milestone in my career, it just as easily could have been another story of a follow from a big fish.

I could tell she was interested when I saw the fish behind my Pounder BullDawg, but since she was three feet behind the lure and about a foot beneath it, getting her to bite was far from a done deal. She did not speed up with the bait when I hopped the Dawg hard and fast along the side of the boat.

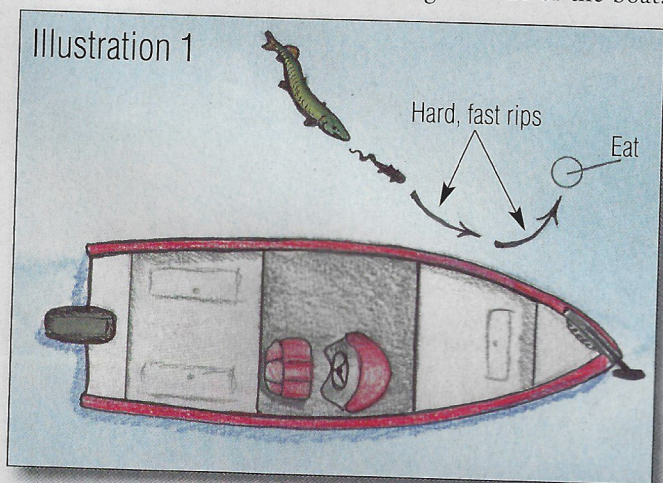
Rather than turning the bait hard away from the boat into the first turn of a figure-8, I let the bait fall in the water for an extra second to let the fish catch up as well as get in a better position.

Then I ripped the bait again hard, but away from the boat. She turned quickly and darted after it as I ran the lure into my straightaway. At this point I knew she was active and wanted to bite, but rather than letting her grab it directly below my feet — which would have made a good hook-set very difficult — I burned the Dawg through the straightaway and turned it away from the boat before letting it “hang” on the outside of the second turn. She closed the gap and smashed the bait, and I was able to set the hook down and back into her, pinning her perfectly. Success!

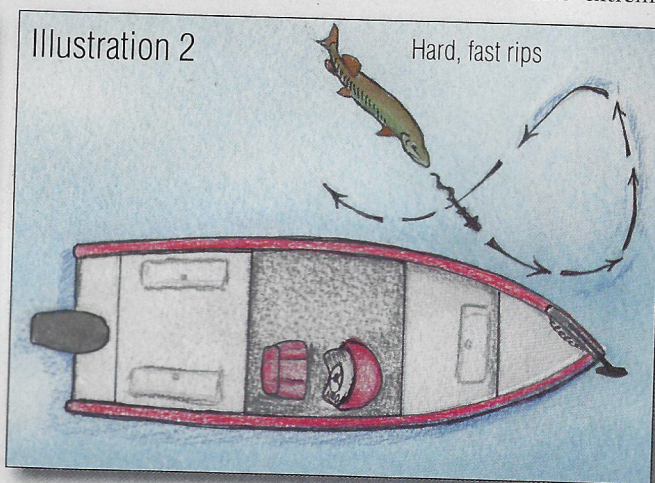
When fishing stop-and-go baits like gliders, jerkbaits and big rubber, a straight-moving figure-8 is far from the most effective maneuver. Instead, if you incorporate the baits’ stop-and-go triggering action into your boatside maneuver, you will be able to read the fish and determine how best to get it to bite.

### Rip Through The 8

As your bait approaches the boat, you should already be using some sort of a pull-pause retrieve to enable the lures’ natural up-down or side-to-side action. Given the lures’ extreme



Two hard, fast rips followed by a turn away from the boat should get an aggressive musky to eat.



If the musky doesn't eat, the first option is to pull your lure as far away from the boat as you can and then turn back to a figure-8.

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amount of triggering action, any fish that follows to the boat without eating is going to be much harder to catch than one following a straight-retrieve bait. This is likely why stop-and-go lures get labeled as bad boatside baits.

Rather, you need to focus on triggering the fish at boatside rather than simply speeding the lure up and giving them a chance to eat like you would with a bucktail. When I take a jerkbait or rubber bait into a figure-8, I use long hops much like those you would impart during the retrieve. When you first see a musky following, you need to make one or two hard, quick rips and turn it into the first turn of the 8, always turning the bait away from the boat. If the fish is fairly aggressive, this is normally all it takes to trigger a strike. (See Illustration 1).

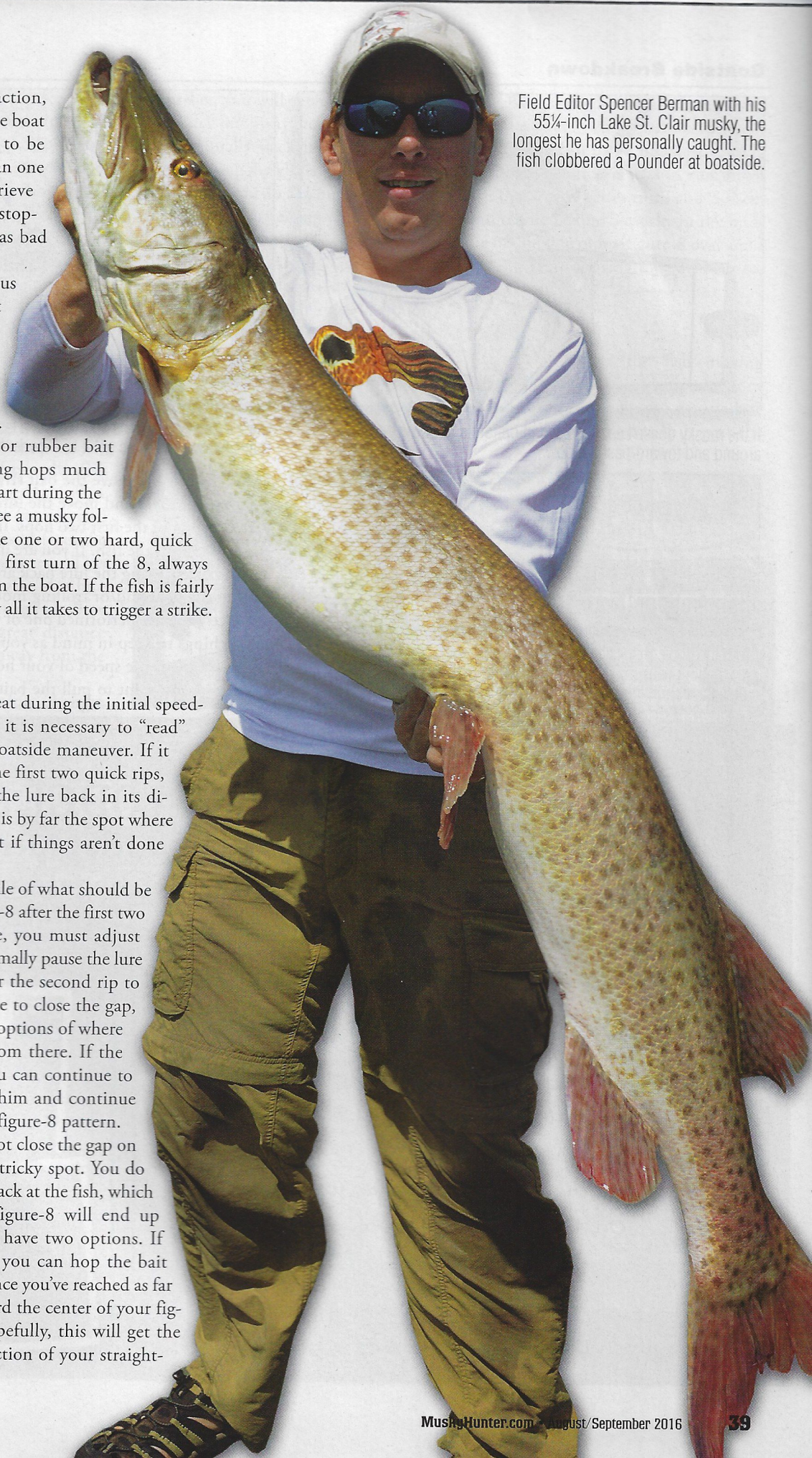
### Read The Fish

If the musky does not eat during the initial speed-up and direction change, it is necessary to “read” the fish and adapt your boatside maneuver. If it does not speed up after the first two quick rips, you won’t want to bring the lure back in its direction and spook it. This is by far the spot where most muskies lose interest if things aren’t done right.

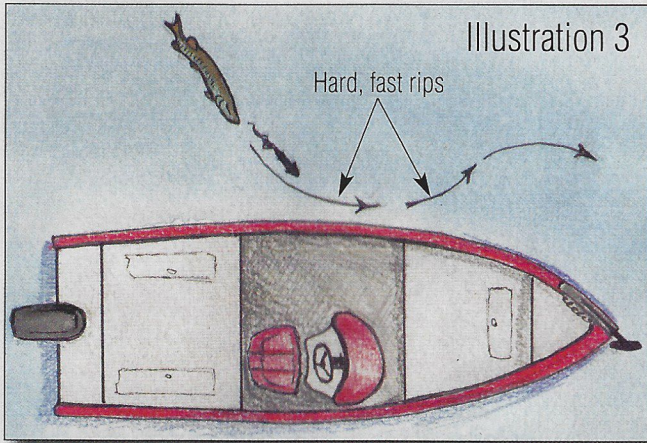
If the fish is in the middle of what should be the first oval of your figure-8 after the first two rips and direction change, you must adjust your approach. First, I normally pause the lure just a little bit longer after the second rip to see if the fish will continue to close the gap, which will give you more options of where you can move the bait from there. If the fish closes on the lure, you can continue to play cat and mouse with him and continue to hop the lure through a figure-8 pattern.

But if the musky does not close the gap on your pause, you’ll be in a tricky spot. You do not want to turn the bait back at the fish, which is what a conventional figure-8 will end up doing. At this point, you have two options. If your rod is long enough, you can hop the bait away from the boat, and once you’ve reached as far as you can turn back toward the center of your figure-8 (Illustration 2). Hopefully, this will get the musky to turn in the direction of your straight-

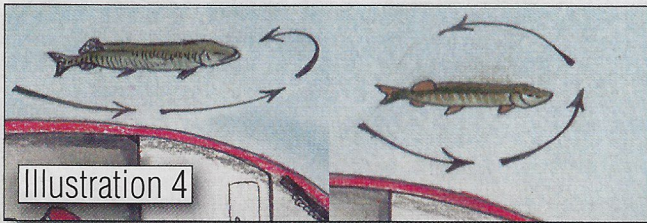
Field Editor Spencer Berman with his 55½-inch Lake St. Clair musky, the longest he has personally caught. The fish clobbered a Pounder at boatside.



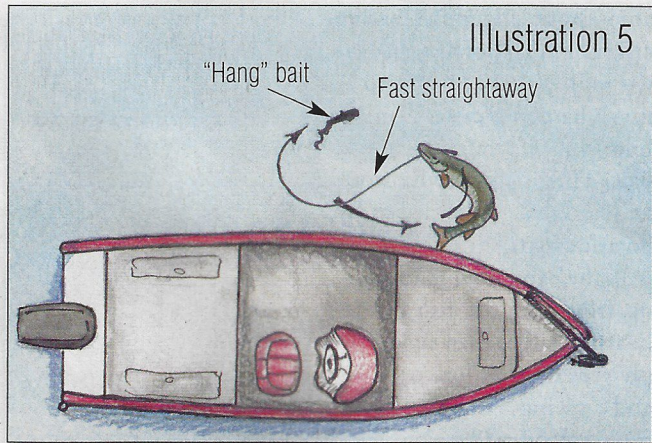
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If the musky doesn't eat, the second option is to swing your lure around and toward/past the bow.



From the book of "Don't Do." When in a figure-8 maneuver, do not turn the lure back into the musky (left), or in a manner that would cause the fish to lose sight of the bait (right).

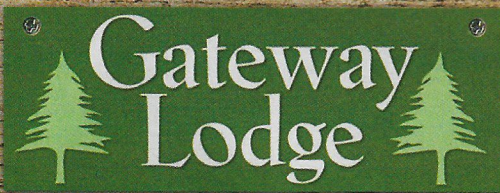


Once a musky becomes aggressive, a fast straightaway followed by a "hang" move will often get it to T-bone the bait.

away. If you can't move the bait straight away from the boat, sidestep your feet and move the lure farther in the same general direction of the first two hops. In this way you won't move the lure toward the fish. If you are in the front of the boat and can't sidestep, bring the lure back around and toward/past the bow of the boat and/or trolling motor (Illustration 3).

Once you have performed one of these maneuvers, there are a few things to keep in mind as you continue to read the fish. The first one is the speed of your hops and the length of your pauses — you want to pull the bait hard in the beginning of

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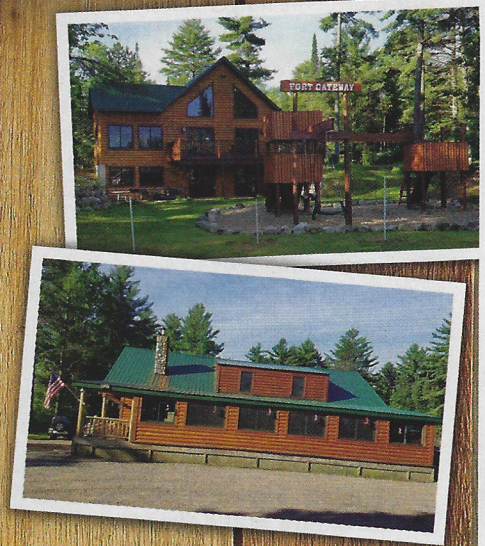


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your rip and then let it hang for a second at the end. If the fish increases speed when you first rip the bait hard, it's getting excited. When this happens you need to give the bait shorter and shorter pauses with more speed in the pulls as the fish continues to get closer to the bait. On the other hand, if the fish does not increase its speed that means you need to work hard to help the fish get lined up behind the bait and make sure you never turn the bait toward the fish, or in a way that would cause the fish to lose sight of it (Illustration 4).

When the musky is lined up on the bait, rip the bait away from the fish hard. If the fish continues to follow slowly, let the bait pause an extra second and then rip it hard twice away from the fish and into the next turn. This J-shaped maneuver will give the lure some direction change as well as allow you to move it along a great distance while not moving too far away from the fish.

Such speed and direction changes should get the fish more interested. If they don't, abandon your current maneuver and turn the bait so you can pull it across the musky's face (at a distance of three to five feet), or preferably in a direction that allows you to run the bait away from the fish. Hopefully this will get the fish to re-engage the bait. If you lose sight of the fish, continue to hop your lure through a big figure-8 pattern and hope it re-engages.

### Walking The Boat

Another very successful concept that I use is "walking" the bait and fish around the boat. This concept seems to be the most productive when fishing glide baits for a few reasons. First of all, gliders have no natural action on a straight retrieve like the long fluttering tail of a BullDawg or other rubber bait, so they don't have much action when turned in a figure-8. When you walk around the boat however, you can work these baits in their designed back and forth motion while increasing speed with each jerk if the fish continues to increase its pursuit.

Further, you will then be able to pull the glider out away from the boat and then gradually back into the boat, all while keeping the glider going back and forth. Once you do run out of real estate you can set yourself up in tight along the boat, using the added time you have had walking to get in good position, and then do a super wide turn away from the boat and then back the other direction, all while using the wide motion to work the glider back and forth.

You can make rubber baits and diver jerkbaits go up and down in a turn, so I prefer a figure-8 with them as opposed

to walking them around the boat. There are, however, two situations where I would abandon the 8 and start to walk the boat. The first is when I run into a fish that I can't get to turn, and the second is when I find a musky in the middle of one side of my figure-8 oval and I want to avoid moving the bait back toward it.

### The Strike

Once you have the fish moving quickly with the bait, it is time to consider how you are going to get the bite as well as get a hook-set. To trigger the

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strike, I continuously hop the bait faster and faster with shorter and shorter pauses until you get to the point where the musky is moving fast enough that pausing the lure would cause the fish to run into the bait. At that point I burn the bait though the remainder of the straightaway while bringing it close to the boat and “hang” the bait at the outside of the turn (Illustration 5, Page 40). This very fast straight motion can push the fish over the edge, and when you pause the bait on the outside of the turn the fish will often cut the corner and T-Bone it.

If the musky charges up to the bait without eating, continue to perform quick hops until the fish is moving fast enough, and then try this concept again. If it appears that the fish wants to eat the bait from behind on the straightaway, do your best to keep it away from the fish. The reason for this is that when you are pulling the lure quickly away from the fish and then allow it to get

overtaken, it is nearly impossible to time the hook-set right.

One of two things will take place if you let this happen. The first possibility is the fish will bite down on the bait, feel hooks, and then open its mouth with the forward motion of the bait pulling it out of its mouth. This will take a split second and the chance of it happening before you can react is shockingly high. The second scenario is you may set too early and rip the lure back into the fish when it has its mouth open — and only around the back end of the bait. If you can keep the bait away from the fish and then hang it on the outside turn, the bait will be perfectly presented for a T-bone strike.

Once you see the musky’s mouth close on the bait, set the hooks by pulling your rod back toward you and back into the fish, while keeping your rod tip low. This will use the forward momentum of the fish and your own setting power to drive the hooks home. By keeping your rod tip down near the

surface of the water, you will be able to maximize hook-setting percentages on these baits, which only have hooks on their belly. You will drive the hooks into the musky’s lower jaw of the fish which is one of the most meaty areas. Hooks set in the lower jaw tend to stay pinned.

The best retrieve for a bucktail is to cast it out and reel it straight in. On the other hand, when fishing a jerkbait, glide bait or rubber bait, we use a pull-pause retrieve. It only makes sense that you employ different figure-8 techniques with such baits. Once you master these maneuvers, you will find there is no such thing as a bad boatside lure.

*Field Editor Spencer Berman guides on Lake St. Clair. For more about him, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)*

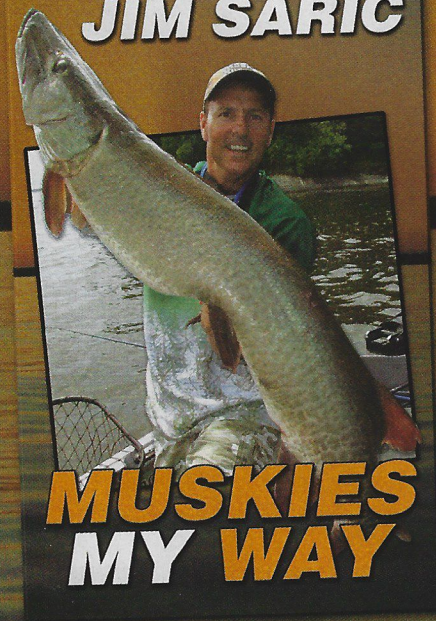


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