

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

“Luck and desperation” may be an unusual response, but when somebody asks me how I started succeeding while casting for muskies on Lake St. Clair, that’s my honest reply.

In June of 2010, musky season on Lake St. Clair had just opened, and during the first week or so we were finding good numbers and some big fish in shallow spawning bays. However, as the water warmed the fish moved out toward open water, and each day we seemed to contact fewer and fewer fish. At the same time, I was hearing reports the south end of the lake, known as being “troller’s water” due to its complete lack of structure, was “on fire.” In fact, my friend Captain Jason Quintano had just experienced an insane 24-fish day with several over 50 inches.

I asked Jason if any of the weedbeds near there had started to grow, but he said they hadn’t. All their trolling fish were coming in open water — not related to anything other than baitfish, he added. Since I prefer to target fish by casting, I decided to stick with the weedbeds in the lake’s north end.

In the following three days only two muskies — both under 36 inches — visited my boat. With reports still red hot from the trollers, I decided I had nothing to lose by fishing the south end even if there was no structure. I reasoned I should at least be able to get a few fish by randomly drifting around. The next day we boated 13 muskies while casting, including 53- and 52-inchers. That night, I called Brad Ruh, the owner of Musky Innovations, and told him “I’m not sure what exactly I have figured out, but I am pretty sure it’s a big deal.”

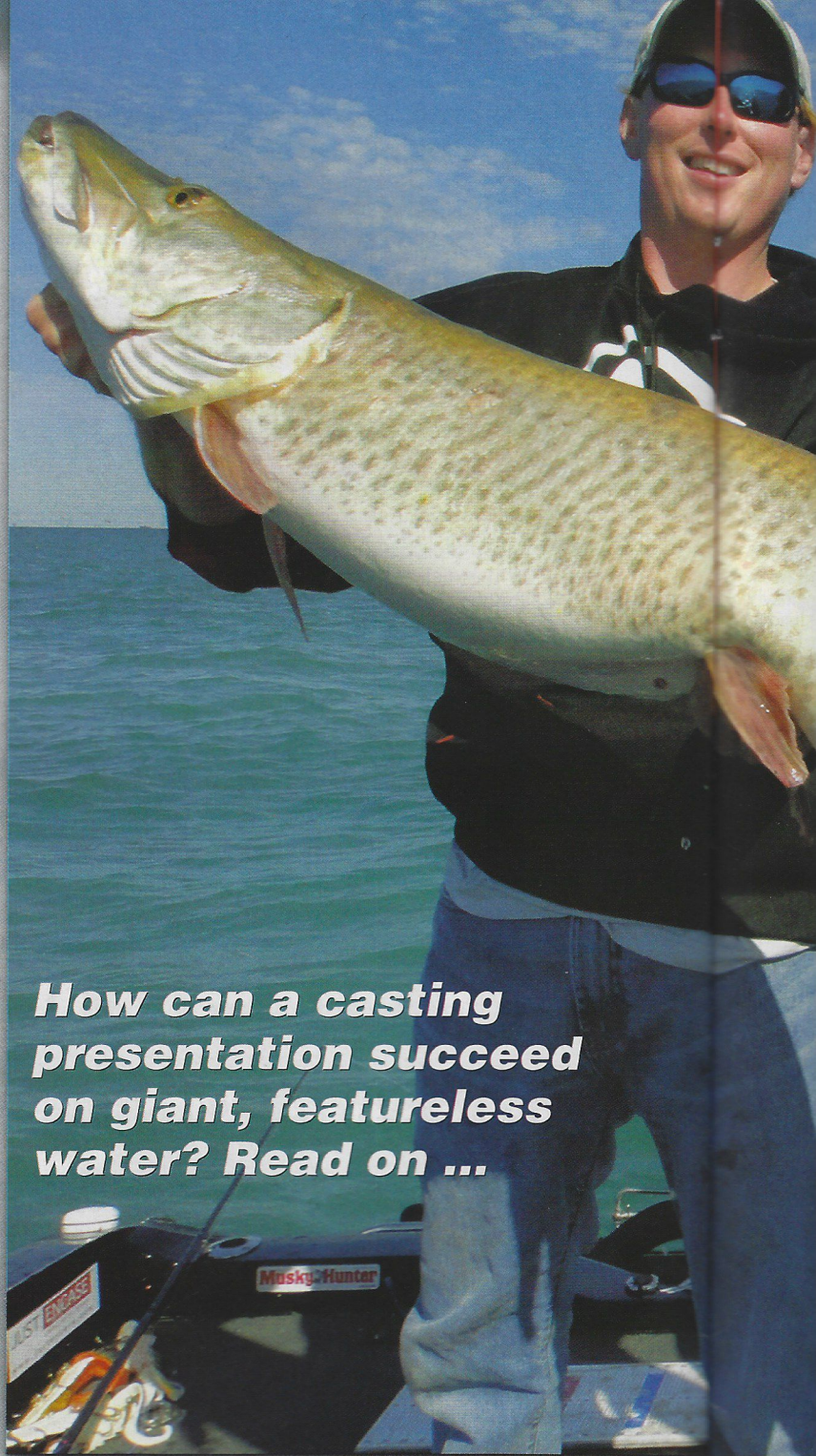
Although open water fishing has always been considered a troller’s game, stories like this prove nothing could be farther from the truth. If you take the time to understand how the open water equation works you will quickly realize there are many situations in which casting to open water makes a lot of sense.

The Casting Advantage

How is it that a caster with one line per person can hope to compete with a troller who is straining water with two or three lines per person? The answer is something I have called the “casting advantage,” and it applies everywhere you can find muskies. This simple math equation demonstrates to us how a caster can make up for his extreme disadvantage in water covered. After the 2011 musky season I decided to compare my clients and my casting numbers with Jason’s trolling numbers for the year. Jason and I had worked together all season and fished similar areas, sharing information and locating hotspots together. First I compared water covered on average, per day.

- Trolling — 12 lines in the water (on average) X 4 mph trolling speed X 12 hours a day = 576 lure miles traveled per day.
- Casting — 3 lines per day X 1.5 mph retrieve speed X 12 hours a day = 54 lure miles traveled per day.

After that, I ran the numbers on our fish caught per day and found we produced roughly 60 percent of the fish the trollers caught, with a better size average. Considering we covered less than 10 percent of the water, just how is it possible we were able to catch 60 percent as many fish?



How can a casting presentation succeed on giant, featureless water? Read on ...

There are several reasons for this. The biggest principle that makes this probable is muskies, especially big ones, don't simply bite the first lure they see. In fact, they may let hundreds go over their heads without skipping a beat until they find one that trips their trigger. For this reason a caster who can impart unique action to his bait can trigger a higher percentage of the muskies that see his lure than a troller who is restricted to only straight-moving baits. This concept opens the door for anglers to try casting in areas which have always been thought of as trolling-only bites, such as the open water of Lake St. Clair. When you take this a step further and combine this principle with a caster's ability to

A photograph of two men on a boat, each holding a large muskie. The man on the left is wearing a black jacket and sunglasses, and the man on the right is wearing a dark jacket and a green cap. They are both smiling. The background shows a clear blue sky and greenish water. The title 'The Casting Advantage' is overlaid in large white text on the right side of the image.

The Casting Advantage

Spencer Berman (left) and Mike Ruchalski scored a doubleheader while casting on Lake St. Clair. The author's struck a Pounder, while Ruchalski's fish ate a Husky Medussa.

position themselves on the prime spot in every trolling pass using his electronics, water color and other less obvious structural elements, you can expect huge results!

Electronics

Regardless if you are casting or trolling in open water, electronics are important. A caster doesn't have the advantage of covering huge amounts of water, so it becomes imperative to not only have good electronics, but to know how to use them.

When you are fishing featureless open water areas, the key becomes schools of baitfish — find the food and you will find the

muskies. A large school of baitfish can easily be the size of a car or bigger, and normally densely-packed, something which is easy to locate with good electronics. However, a school of baitfish in open water is not like finding a giant weedbed you can fish for hours. You then need to establish if the school is isolated or if there are more schools in the area — you want to look for areas that consistently hold baitfish.

There are three basic techniques you can use to locate baitfish schools in open water. First, if you know where some good open water baitfish areas are going to be, you can go out and start casting at them and watch your electronics as you fish to determine

The Casting Advantage

the best spots. This concept only works if you have a good starting point. If you are not marking good baitfish, you will have to either expand your search to see if the baitfish and muskies have only moved a short distance. Normally they follow wind or water clarity changes.

If this doesn't work then you must employ one of the two following options. The first is to drive through areas without fishing and simply use your electronics to find baitfish. The second option is to troll potential areas and over the course of a few hours determine where you are marking the most baitfish as well as any spots you have contacted muskies. At that point you can come back to cast the best-looking areas.

Advanced Electronics

Since electronics are your best friend, it should be no shock that some of the new advances play a huge role in open water success. In my opinion, side imaging is easily the greatest advancement since GPS. Using electronics such as Humminbird Side Imaging, you can cover up to a huge stretch of water on either side of your boat rather than only what is beneath you. You can cover hundreds of times more water in a single pass. Additionally, side imaging allows you to mark baitfish suspended high in the water column that would be spooked by the boat, and thus "invisible" to basic sonar. New innovations such as

Humminbird's 360-degree imaging make open water fishing even easier.

Water Clarity

Another factor to locating prime casting spots in open water is water clarity, because baitfish will often relate to it. This is the same principle as when you are deep sea fishing and someone says you need to go to the "blue water."

Different types of baitfish have different preferences for water clarity. Shad, for example, like water with some stain because they are filter feeders and eat micro particles in the water. Gin-clear water contains nothing for shad to eat. On the other hand, ciscoes eat a lot of insect larvae and are going to be in areas where the water color is right for the insects that are hatching. Always note the water color that seems to be holding the most baitfish and muskies, and you will see obvious patterns emerge.

Subtle Structure

As you spend more time trolling or casting in open water, you will discover spots where you tend to catch more big muskies despite a lack of obvious structure. Lake St. Clair is notorious for this. Over the last two years, three muskies of 55 inches or more have visited my boat and they've all been caught within 250 feet of one another — in a lake that covers 274,000 acres! At first glance, this area appears to

have absolutely no reason muskies would be located there. However, after putting a lot of big fish waypoints on this spot, I finally decided to view the bottom with an underwater camera. I found the bottom contains a sand patch about three football fields in length located in an area where the bottom is mostly mud. There is zero change in depth and it would be nearly impossible to notice as you went over it unless you knew what to look for. For this reason, it is important to waypoint all your musky contacts and use that information to help to identify these hotspots.

Once you locate these prime "spot on the spot" locations in open water, you will realize they are much different than other "prime" spots, such as rock bars and weedbeds. You can pull up on classic spots anytime and hope to catch fish. In contrast, open water spots are only going to be productive when the conditions dictate the fish have moved to that specific area. If the fish are in open water two miles offshore, then you should target spots that tend to hold fish when they congregate two miles offshore.

But let's say there is a wind change and the water color shifts, which causes the fish to leave and move out an additional two miles. When this happens you need to focus on your hotspots four miles offshore because everything two miles offshore will no longer be worth your time. Once the conditions change and the fish move back to two miles offshore, those original spots will again be your top producers. Knowing the location of several subtle structural hotspots allows you to limit your need to cover water — you know where the fish will be.

There is little doubt the future of musky fishing is going to involve more and more big water. Although it is common belief you must troll and cover water on larger systems, when you apply these concepts you will find casting can be a top-producing method in any situation.

Field Editor Spencer Berman guides on Lake St. Clair. For more about him, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com



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