

# Set It

**A good hook-set is often the difference between success and failure in musky fishing**

**By Spencer Berman, Field Editor**

One of the coolest parts of musky fishing is how many different aspects there are to the sport. You can spend thousands of hours thinking about all the different facets involved in catching these fish without ever going over the same thing twice — there is no other fish in fresh water with so many different considerations!

Since there are so many different aspects, we tend to overlook the simple things. One prime example is your hook-set. Although setting the hook seems so simple, nothing could be further from the truth. A proper hook-set involves a great deal of forethought, skill and technique.

## **It's Not So Simple**

Most probably think setting the hook is simple. When a musky bites you merely pull hard and you are all set ... but that's not the case. Thinking of a hook-set as a simple task would be the equivalent of telling a Major League Baseball hitter that hitting a home run is as simple as swinging the bat hard and hitting the ball out of the park. Easy, right?

Of course not! We all know that when you get up to bat with a freak of nature perched on the mound 60 feet away from you, hitting a pitched ball traveling 100-plus miles per hour takes an amazing amount of skill. The perfect swing involves lots of technique. Fortunately, the perfect hook-set is not quite as

The author sets the hook hard. Note how he's setting across his body for power. Also note the angle of his rod — while fishing a BullDawg, which rides low in the water column, he is setting upward.

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challenging, but it does involve good technique, timing and preparation.

## The Grip

A good place to start when it comes to hook-sets is your grip. In fact, it is probably one of the more frequently-asked questions I get as a musky guide. For me, there are two acceptable ways to hold the rod.

The first is to palm the reel in your hand. With this grip you will have a minimum of three fingers in front of the trigger, and you can use your bicep to pull across your body to get a powerful hook-set. Although palming is adequate, the best grip of all is to hold the rod by its foregrip. By moving your hand that far forward you increase the amount of leverage of your hook-set.

This added power comes from the physics principle of a fulcrum. The farther forward on the fulcrum the more power you can apply. Although the foregrip hold has a bit more power, most anglers find it very hard to get used to. Also, in the fall, water coming off your reel tends to fall inside your gloves. For that reason I hold the foregrip in warmer weather and palm the reel in colder weather. Either one of these grips will give you the power you need to get a good set on a trophy musky.

## The Proper Swing

As we all know, the proper musky hook-set involves swinging your rod in order to apply a blast of pressure on the fish. This force will break the fish's jaw pressure on the bait and drive the hooks into its mouth. In order to accomplish this we must first look at how you swing the rod on

your hook-set.

The first major thing I preach to guys about their rod swing is to always set across your body. What that means is, if you are using a right-hand retrieve baitcasting reel and the rod is under your left arm, you swing the rod to your right across your body. If you are using a left-handed baitcaster with the rod under your right arm, then you would swing the rod to your left.

For some reason I see a lot of people trying to set the hook to their weak side, which is the reverse of the way I just described. In doing so you vastly reduce your power on the set. This often means the hooks don't get driven into the fish and the chances of landing the fish are greatly reduced. If, however, you set to your strong side you will maximize your power and give yourself the best chance of driving those hooks home.

The next major consideration on the swing of your hook-set is the angle you take. This topic is very widely debated among musky fishermen, with some saying you should set across your body at an upward angle and others saying you should keep the rod down so you don't pull the fish toward the surface. In my opinion you need to look at the bait you are casting to determine which is correct for you.

If you are casting a lure that rides very close to or on the water's surface, then you should set the hook across your body and keep the rod roughly level to the water or lower. This means your rod will be either parallel to the surface of the water or angled down slightly with the rod tip closer to the surface than the rod butt. With high-riding lures, this hook-set will ensure that you don't encourage the fish to bring its head out of the water and jump.

## Set It Right

On the other side, when you are using a lure that runs a decent distance under the water, say four to five feet or more, the proper hook-set is to swing the rod across your body either parallel to the water or at a slight upward angle. This will help to fully maximize your power and get the best set possible. This hook-set ensures that you avoid hitting anything on your boat with the rod, such as your trolling motor head, windshield, motor, or another fisherman. One of the worst things that can happen when you set the hook is to smash your rod into your trolling motor head, which means you possibly break the rod, lose the fish and, of course, receive lots of ribbing from your fishing buddies.

Once you swing the rod and get the hook set, it then becomes important to adjust your rod tip downward and try to keep the fish under the water. If you feel the fish coming up toward the surface, drop your rod tip even lower to dissuade the fish from jumping. Keep in mind that if a fish really wants to jump there is nothing you can do to stop it. As long as your rod tip is low with good pressure on the fish, you will have done what you can to try to keep the fish in the water. Even if it jumps and comes off, you know you did everything you could.



Once the hook is set, you must adjust your rod position to try to keep the musky's head beneath the water. This is especially important with giant fish like this one held by author Spencer Berman.

## Be In Position

All too often my clients are not prepared for a strike because they are out of position. In fact, after losing a fish many tell me they were not ready at the time of the strike. The bottom line is that you should always be ready.

You must constantly be asking yourself if you got a strike right now, where would you swing the rod and how would you fight the fish. If your buddy is standing next to you and you may hit him with your rod when you set the hook, you shouldn't think you'll worry about it when it happens. Instead, you should arrange yourself and your boat so you are in a good position and can get a good set on the fish.

Always be thinking about how you will be doing your hook-set and whether you will be in good position to make strikes count.

## Reaction Time

After years of guiding repeat clients, I came to realize I fish with some who seem to never lose fish. Some are experienced anglers but many are not. In addition, we are mostly casting big rubber — Musky Innovations BullDawgs and Chaos Tackle Medussas — both of which are not known for consistent hook-ups.

Since these return clients fish with me every year for several days, I knew it couldn't be as simple as the fish were feeding on the days they came. The sample size was simply too big with too many variables. What I figured out was these anglers tend to be guys who were at least somewhat athletic and are mentally prepared and not half-asleep. This meant their reaction time to a bite was significantly better than others.

As I began to pay more attention to this, I realized a quick reaction time has a tremendous impact on hook-set success. I also came to realize my personal hook-up rate decreased significantly toward the end of longer days on the water.

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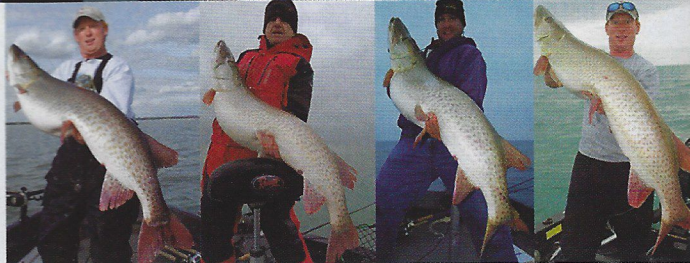
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Meanwhile, after a day off where I could catch up on sleep and recharge, it seemed like my hooks were covered with Super Glue. This really proved to me that reaction time is super-important for everyone regardless of their experience.

To understand why reaction time is so important, you must first understand how a musky bites a lure. A musky will initially hold on to the bait with its mouth closed until it feels pressure. Once you begin to apply pressure, it realizes something isn't right and will immediately open its mouth and try to spit the bait. If your reaction time is quick, you will greatly increase the chances of getting your hook-set in while the fish has its mouth closed around the bait. If your hook-set is slow, then you often are setting the hook while the fish has its mouth open and is trying to get rid of the bait, making for a very low chance of getting hooks into the fish.

The ultimate example/proof of this is to look at trolling. A good troller normally can land at least 75 to 90 percent

of the muskies that strike. The main reason for this extremely high hook-up rate is your lure is moving constantly with your boat. When a musky grabs a lure, the boat pulls the lure and hooks into its mouth while it is still closed. The set is never too early, never too late, but rather always perfect.

There are two other major variables which affect how long a musky holds onto your lure when it bites. The first is the amount of fishing pressure your favorite lake receives. On lakes that are heavily pressured, most of the muskies have been caught repeatedly. These fish tend to be very aware of the fact that when they grab what they think is dinner and it instead pulls back slightly, they need to get rid of it immediately because a big hook-set is coming. On such waters, you will see the biggest hook-set success going to the person with the fastest reaction time because the time between strike and set is only a fraction of a second. On the other hand, when you are on lakes that don't see much fishing pres-

sure, the muskies tend to be much less educated and therefore will hold onto baits a bit longer, which provides an extra split second to get the hook set.

By always being prepared and knowing the proper mechanics of a good hook-set, you will ensure a good set on every musky. Additionally, if you are focused and at the top of your game, your reaction time should be sufficient. An angler who is ready, knows proper hook-set form, and has lightning fast reaction time will not give the muskies any chance to get away!

*For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)*

*Editor's note — In Musky Hunter's April/May issue, Minnesota guide Ryan McMahon dissects the angles at which muskies eat lures, and to adjust your hook-set to accommodate them.*

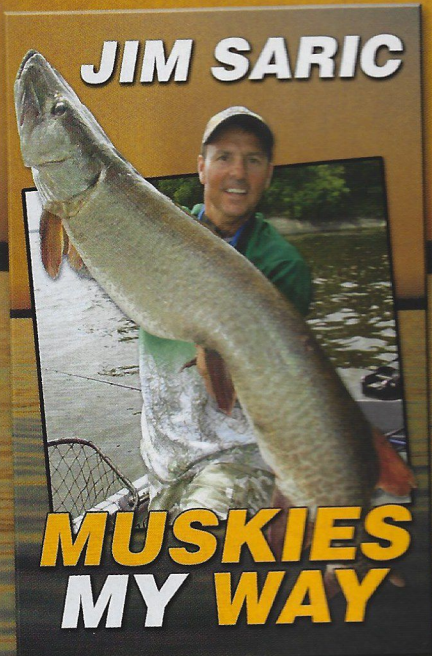


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