



What lies

THINK YOU UNDERSTAND MUSKIES?

Don Schwartz thought he did until he started recording them underwater.

10 unconventional tips for landing more giants

By GORD PYZER

Beneath

Don Schwartz



Fresh angle: Don Schwartz challenges muskie fishing conventions; (top right) his Trainwreck lure

Don Schwartz was already obsessed with muskies long before he first attached an underwater camera to the cannonball on his downrigger. But that all changed when he saw the first images of one of the giant predators slide in behind his lure and inhale it. Now he's downright possessed by the toothy devils.

For Schwartz, who divides his time between his home in Wisconsin and a cabin in northwestern Ontario, the allure of entering the natural environment of these voracious freshwater predators has become all-consuming. "I get mesmerized when I see a fish appear on the screen, stalking my bait," he says. "I stop paying attention to everything else."

How mesmerized? "Once I lower the Aqua-Vu camera, downrigger and lure, I keep the boat moving at a constant trolling speed, but it's challenging going over shallow rock reefs and submerged hazards," Schwartz explains. "I've ripped off everything from the boat."

Fortunately, he's become skilled at simultaneously monitoring the sonar for depth and minding the shoreline to keep track of his position, all the while keeping an eye on the camera recording his lure. And when mishaps do occur, Schwartz views the wear and tear on his equipment as an occupational hazard, well worth the reward of seeing things most other muskie hunters can only imagine.

But there's been an even bigger payoff for recording and studying the lifestyle, behaviour and routines of these big, toothy critters: Schwartz has discovered several new muskie-catching secrets, including several tactics that challenge some long-held muskie-fishing beliefs. Pay heed to his findings, and you're bound to up the odds of catching this elusive fish of 10,000 casts.

1 Head for CALM

ANGLERS have long believed that the best muskie-fishing locations in a lake, river or reservoir are enhanced when current, either natural or wind-induced, is present. As a result, they routinely risk life, limb and property casting giant lures in the wildest of

spots. But monster muskies don't always reside in the hairiest locations.

Instead, on the "crazy days," as Schwartz likes to call them, when the wind is howling and whitecaps whip the water into a froth, he finds the fish on the calmer sides of structure. "I don't believe they're always in the wind," he says. "In windy weather, I find most of the fish in calm eddies. In particular, they relate to the seams where rushing water meets tranquil water."

2 Forget the BAITFISH

ANOTHER fallacy when it comes to muskie-fishing locations, says Schwartz, is that if you can find the forage fish muskies like to eat—suckers, smelt, whitefish, herring and walleye—you'll also find the giant predators. But his underwater observations don't bear this out. The truth is, he seldom finds muskies in areas where baitfish are present.

3 Steal the SHOW

IT can't be disputed that muskies are extremely inquisitive creatures that, with the right enticement, can be attracted like kids to a candy factory. But you might be surprised at what excites them the most: three-, five- and eight-pound cannonballs crashing into rocks for one thing, and gigantic lures crashing into the lake bottom for another. Yes, muskies will charge erratic, whirling, noisy objects with reckless abandon.

"When I was trolling lures tight to the cannonball, I could attract muskies to the camera," says Schwartz. "But, I wanted to film one actually eating the bait. I had great difficulty doing it, however, because the fish were so locked on the cannonball smashing into the bottom and the propeller whirling on my small outboard motor, that they swam right past the lures."

That was several years ago, and it got Schwartz designing a lure that would distract the fish from the cannonball, camera and propeller. He attached bigger and bigger blades trying to catch their attention, until eventually he was trolling an 18-inch-long lure. That was the genesis of his highly successful Trainwreck, a giant spinnerbait adorned with a wrist-thick plastic grub.

"I needed something big enough and loud enough to get their attention,"

says Schwartz. "I made the lure for personal reasons, not with the intention of marketing a new muskie bait." Perhaps, but the strategy worked to perfection, as evidenced by his underwater footage of a beautiful muskie sliding in behind a spinning Trainwreck (right), flaring its gills, opening its huge toothy mouth and engulfing the bait.

4 Give 'em PROPS

EQUALLY as spellbinding as the video of the fish trailing the Trainwreck is footage of muskies eyeballing the spinning prop on Schwartz's kicker motor. Like playful kids running around in a park, fish can be seen rushing in and out of the picture, checking out the propeller and ignoring everything else.

"There is something to trolling your lures at the side of the boat in the prop wash," Schwartz says, adding that it's a common practice on Lake St. Clair. He also tells of a friend on Georgian Bay who has had similar success with this technique. "And remember, for me to capture these fish on video, I've got my downrigger and camera placed right beside the propeller and my lure is usually only a few feet away. You simply can't spook these fish."

5 Change your RETRIEVE

"WHEN a muskie wants to eat your lure, you can't keep it away from the fish," says Schwartz. "But the opposite is just as true. Most muskie anglers would be amazed if they knew how many times nice fish have followed their baits. They

would be even more amazed if they knew how long the fish trailed behind the boat."

Schwartz says he routinely watches muskies follow his lures as though they're hypnotized. When they don't bite, he attempts to trigger them by speeding up the boat to as much as 10 kilometres an hour. Usually, they just continue following the baits, like bloodhounds hot on a trail, for up to a kilometre or more, even out over water as deep as 60 feet.

One big fish chased his lure for so long that Schwartz, in total frustration, hauled away on the downrigger and cranked up the cannonball as fast as he could. The muskie simply followed the lure right to the surface. "What this tells me is that most muskie lures are not dynamic enough and most anglers don't retrieve their baits erratically enough to trigger the fish," he says. "It is probably why we see so many fish following our lures. Ninety per cent of this lure stuff is up here in our heads."



SHAFT SHORTENING

IF YOU'RE LIKE most muskie hunters, you own an embarrassing number of expensive bucktails, spinnerbaits and in-line spinners. Expert Don Schwartz says you can greatly increase the effectiveness of your lures if you doctor the shafts. In particular, try shortening the distance between the line tie and the first bead and clevis to half an inch. It may look strange, but Schwartz says it will considerably increase the lure's vibration. "The vibrations we get from these man-made materials are the key way we trigger strikes," he says. "Anyone can catch muskies when the fish are biting like crazy, but when they're not, it's the little changes that make all the difference."



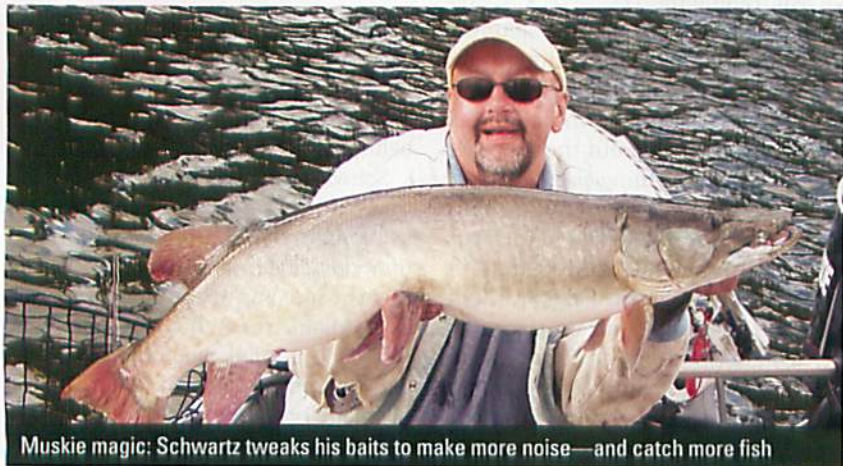
6 Make some NOISE

BASED on watching how muskies react to the Trainwreck, Schwartz says the vibration a lure emits is more important than anything else. "Thicker blades on bucktails, spinnerbaits and in-line spinners are easier to retrieve when you reel them in because they rotate closer to the shaft and don't grab as much water," he says. "Thinner blades, on the other hand, bulge out and create more vibration."

What this means is, early in the summer when muskie season first opens, and again late in the fall when the water is cold, thicker (.040 inches), quieter, less-obtrusive Colorado, Indiana, Willowleaf, Turtleback and French blades attract and trigger more muskies than thinner (.020 inches), noisier blades of the same size. When the fish are active, however, as they are in the warmer summer months, watch out—that's when thinner blades will win hands down every time. Even smaller number six or eight blades made of thinner

material will outfish the much bigger number 10s.

And the good vibrations don't stop there. Schwartz says this principle also applies to the diameter of the spinner's wire shaft. A shaft made from thinner .030-gauge wire will shake, rattle and roll, and create more noise than a thicker one fashioned from heavier .050-gauge wire (also see "Shaft shortening"). Note that if you don't perfectly straighten a shaft that gets bent from landing a big fish, it won't run true and muskies will shy away from it.



Muskie magic: Schwartz tweaks his baits to make more noise—and catch more fish

7 Spank the PLASTIC

IN addition to his groundbreaking insights into the different vibrational properties of thick and thin blades on bucktails, spinnerbaits, buzzbaits and in-line spinners, Schwartz says certain crankbaits deflect off rocks, logs and boulders better than others. Lures sporting hard plastic-polycarbonate lips, for example, will bounce off objects more effectively than lures with metal bills, which tend to snag and hang up more often.

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8 Stick to STRUCTURE

BEFORE Schwartz gained his underwater insights into muskie behaviour, he would slowly approach likely hot spots, staying as far away as possible and making long casts. But after recording fish chasing eight-pound cannonballs and looking at the prop on his outboard, Schwartz changed his approach. "I am not as cautious as I used to be," he says. "Nor am I as concerned about how I control my boat when I'm fishing a piece of structure. Now I get up much tighter."

9 Make a MOVE

THANKS to his aquatic camera work, Schwartz also contends that muskies have both active and inactive periods. When they want to eat, he says, nothing else matters. But when they don't want to eat, there's simply nothing you can do to make them bite. As a result, he has become a run-and-gun angler.

According to Schwartz, the best way to improve your chances of catching more and bigger muskies is to hit more spots

over the course of a day. "Don't spend 45 minutes or an hour at one spot," he advises. "Keep moving. You don't need to dissect a spot when the fish are aggressive. Hitting a dozen high-percentage areas is a much better strategy than painstakingly picking apart two."

10 Know the BITE

FINALLY, Schwartz has also learned that big muskies attack lures differently than smaller fish do. The giants move methodically, with heart-pounding purpose, while smaller, 40-inch-range snot rockets go berserk, racing up to lures,

scooting under and over them. Schwartz reckons he'd never have learned this tidbit—or his many other insights—had a giant muskie not come up and eaten his lure the very first time he started experimenting with an underwater camera. "That first fish hooked me," he says. "It was like I was watching the scene unfold in slow motion. She cruised in behind my lure, sped up and all I saw was this enormous mouth open up and eat it."

These days, Schwartz continues with his underwater observations, complete with a new Aqua-Vu colour monitor. And rest assured, he'll soon have even more priceless tips for tackling these giant freshwater predators. ♦

DIFFERENT STRIKES

PIKE AND MUSKIES are so closely related that many novice anglers have trouble telling them apart. And while you'd think the two fish would behave similarly in lakes where they live together, that's just not the case. Other than one aggressive pike that once attacked his eight-pound lead cannonball, Schwartz says pike are typically more skittish than muskies.



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