



**Don Schwartz** was born to tinker. The man is simply incapable of fishing a lure straight from the package without adding, subtracting, or altering something. You've never seen a boat so full of "experiments." Between the 10-bladed "cowbell" spinners, multi-hinged inline spinners, and jingle-bell bucktails, it's a wonder that muskies ever enter his boat. Schwartz has thrown some pretty funky stuff. Still, he's one of the better muskie fishermen I've ever known.

He puts 80 muskies in the boat each year, including his share of 50-inch fish. He's thrown and caught fish with all the great classic baits—Bobbies, Grandmas, Believers, Harassers, and more. During the past two seasons, he's made some discoveries with regard to the perennially productive spinner blade.

Like many anglers these days, Schwartz relies heavily on the big double Colorado blades—the Musky Mayhem Double Cowgirls of the world. Given their success, you'd be silly not to. Yet as a manic experimenter, he's always after that one last edge, the little something he can modify to make a good lure even better. So he tweaks a little of this and that and sees what sticks. More and more these days, he simply crafts his own baits from scratch.

DECONSTRUCTING

Darla

The "craft" connotation is appropriate, for Schwartz can frequently be found plugging away in his workshop—a lure shop, really—complete with lure molds, wire forms, mandrels, and stacks of little boxes filled with hooks, beads, clevises, wire, split rings, and myriad other minor curiosities. He isn't just a weekend tinkerer. He's a certified lure designer, creating proven baits like the TrainWreck Spinnerbait, and a series of custom crankbaits that have produced big fish for some of the top names in muskie fishing.

Still, over the past few seasons the bait that has consumed his thoughts—the style he's pondered and customized the most—is the inline spinner. As a lure man, Schwartz cherishes the inline, dreams spinner dreams, for it's the ultimate "tinkering" bait—the one that allows for maximum customization. It's a perpetual quest, with the unattainable goal of concocting the perfect muskie lure. Just so many different moving parts on an inline spinner—opportunities really, to improve upon what is already a fundamentally great design.

For Schwartz, though, the blade's the thing. The blade makes muskie music—that unmistakably important yet ambiguous factor known as vibration. It's there, we know it's there, and we think it helps muskies find and eat our lures. Like most great muskie anglers, he has his own thoughts on blades—some fact, some theory, all born of a lifetime of chasing the great muskie dream. The ideas had been collecting for years. Then last season, everything came together with an enormous muskie and a lure named Big Darla.

## **"WHEN YOU FIRST SEE THE BAIT, IT'S A LOT TO SWALLOW. WHILE MOST ANGLERS TODAY ARE COMFORTABLE THROWING 12-INCH BUCKTAILS AND MAGNUM BLADES, SCHWARTZ SOMETIMES WENT BIGGER STILL, OPTING FOR A 16-INCHER SO BRASH IT REQUIRED A NAME"**

### **How Big is Too Big is Just Right?**

Big Darla, indeed—a monstrosity of a lure, complete with double #10 Colorados, neon-pink and pearlescent Mylar, and a great big plastic tail. When you first see the bait, it's a lot to swallow. While most anglers today are comfortable throwing 12-inch bucktails and magnum blades, Schwartz sometimes went bigger still, opting for a 16-incher so brash it required a name.

The question on a lot of anglers' minds at this point is: Where does the big blade, big bait thing end? Will we see 20-inch inlines with #20 blades? That we may have already reached the end was driven home in a big way during the past year's circuit of muskie tradeshow. Several exhibitors peddled baits adorned with blades as large as a #20—a slab of brass half the size of a license plate. The implication being, if big is good, bigger is great. Most anglers today understand the physical requirements of throwing double #10 Colorados all day, but the idea of twin #20s represents a frontier of agony and near impossibility most of us don't even want to think about.

Although there's little question that muskies can be attracted with these monstrosities, the reality is that performance-wise, rod and reel manufacturers are just catching

up. The old classic red Garcia 7000 still does the job, and it's the reel Schwartz uses, even with the double #10s. Other anglers prefer Shimanos, particularly a Trinidad TN12 or a Calcutta TE400LJV. With a 6.2:1 gear ratio and a deep spool capable of holding several hundred yards of heavy braid, the Trinidad may be the only reel capable of really burning the magnum blades; but it lacks a level wind, which takes some getting used to. Or you can pick up a \$450 Calcutta and just be done with it. The TE400LJV is one of the smoothest casting reels ever made.

On the home front, *In-Fisherman* Editor In Chief Doug Stange has been using the Penn 975. The 975 is an old-school winch-style saltwater reel, 4.5:1 gear ratio, featuring stainless-steel drive gears and ball bearings, instant anti-reverse, and a counter-balanced power handle similar to the Garcia 7000. Stange says the 975 is easier to palm than a 7000, much smoother and, overall, is the best reel he's found to deal with the big bucks.

As reels improve and evolve, so do rods. Last season, I took the advice of Mille Lacs, Minnesota, guide Tim Anderson, who prefers a 9-foot heavy casting rod for his blade fishing. I was using a Musky Innovations 8-foot 6-inch (MIH86) rod for swim-bait fishing. But it quickly became a new favorite for heaving big blades.

# Muskie Blades: THOUGHTS & THEORIES

BY GORY SCHMIDT\*

The length and power combination of rods like these lets you hammer some pretty long casts. But the big thing with the longer rods is the extra control they lend to boat-side maneuvers, so long as you have a boat larger than 16 feet. When you spot a following fish 10 feet or more from the boat, you can reel up, poke the tip immediately underwater, and go into the L-turn just a little sooner than with a shorter rod, often getting a fish to eat with a sudden direction change. With a longer rod you can get the bait down to deeper followers, too, and can use the extra tip length to accelerate the bait rapidly on the straightaway.

Schwartz, meanwhile, relies on a 7-foot 6-inch Fenwick Techna AV (AVC 76MHMC). "You need a rod that's capable of driving a spike—that's what it sometimes takes to set hooks," he says. "I think with some of the super-long rods, you lose a bit of hook-setting power in the tip." But just like blade choice, rod selection is a compromise, he says.

Schwartz sums up the big blade sensation: "With the monster #13s on the market, such as those on the Figure Eight Lucky 13, we've reached the end, at least for now. Muskie fishermen by nature seem to embrace pain and misery—I'm right there, believe me—but given how difficult these giant baits can be for the average angler to throw, well, eventually, even I have the good sense to cry uncle. In any case, there's so much more to the big spinner thing than size alone."

Indeed, while today's prevailing talk focuses on blade size—often, the bigger the better—Schwartz considers other factors to be equally important.

### Factoring Blade Thickness

"All this big-blade stuff started with the Cowgirl craze," Schwartz says. "I was curious to find out just what it was that made these lures so productive. So I went into my shop and started building baits with a variety of components. The object is to make the best bait possible—to determine the pluses and minuses of each moving part, then replace the negative parts with beneficial ones."

"All the while I was out on the water testing. I started to study the blade itself—not just size but the thickness of the metal, even the way

the blade was shaped and bent. I don't think many muskie fishermen consider blade thickness—but I think that size and blade design being equal, blade thickness is a critical element affecting performance."

Today, most inline bucktail-style lures use blades with either a .025- or a .040-inch thickness. The Double Cowgirl uses .025 blades, while the new Blue Fox Muskie Twin Turbo has .040 blades. "Last year, I assembled a few experimental baits, making two of each design, identical in every way except for blade



Musky Mayhem Double Cowgirl





Blue Fox Twin Turbo



Shumway Giant Flasher



Big Darla

## » New Classics

thickness—one with double #10 Colorados in .025 and one with the same blades in .040. I wanted to see differences in performance as dictated by thickness alone."

What Schwartz found and offers as a result is his set of guidelines about blade performance. Generally, size being equal, the thickness of the blade affects rotational speed, water resistance or lift (actually, resistance to fall), and pitch or vibration. He says that thinner Colorado blades offer more water resistance, because they rotate more slowly at a given retrieve speed, vibrate at a lower pitch, and provide more lift. They're also easier to "start" on the retrieve.

Reeling in .025 blades is more difficult, because they rotate farther from the shaft than thicker blades. That also makes them more difficult to burn but well suited to surface bulging.

The first commercially available magnum #10 Colorados featured a .018-inch thickness, but they were so difficult to retrieve that manufacturers discontinued them, beefing up to .025s and, more recently, to .040s.

"Most of the .040s pull a lot more easily," Schwartz says. "But perhaps

we're giving up some of the thump that appeals best to some muskies? Early in the season through about midsummer, the .025s have been most effective for me. The .040 has been a better fall or coldwater blade. Most of the thicker blades are easier to roll slowly, and they're easier to get deeper in the water column."

Schwartz thinks, too, that most of the .040s are superior for faster retrieves. They pull more easily because they rotate closer to the shaft and draft less water than the .025s. "Size being equal, you'd think a heavier blade would be harder to retrieve, but that's usually not the case," he says.

Schwartz: "If you're serious about bucktail and spinnerbait fishing, you should factor blade thickness into lure choice. It's a game of balancing vibration and speed.

"Speed can be a powerful trigger for muskies. But in warm water, I'd lean on the vibration side of the equation, sacrificing speed in favor of thump. When muskies are turned on and feeding during the warmest water periods of the year, I find they respond best to thinner blades that provide more whomp—the double

#10 Colorados in .025 thicknesses like those on the Cowgirl."

Schwartz admits that right now his theory is his alone. He also admits that other factors enter the equation, like the frequency of a blade's vibration being contingent on speed—the faster you retrieve a lure, the faster the blades rotate, and the higher the pitch.

Given what we know about the way muskies hear and feel lures—they hear best the low-frequency vibrations under 1,000 Hz and feel even better the lower-frequency vibrations below about 100 Hz—it's tempting to say that thinner, lower-pitched blades retrieved at steady speed at times attract fish best, while occasional bursts of speed often best trigger them. But with muskies there's always more to the story.



### Blade Basics and Beyond

Narrower blade designs like the willowleaf on the classic Windels Harrasser revolve tighter to the shaft (at about a 25-degree angle), rotate faster, and generate at a higher-frequency pitch.

Next on the spinner spectrum is the French blade, with a 40-degree rotation angle. This blade is used on two more time-tested muskie spinners, the Blue Fox Musky Buck and the Mepps Musky Killer. These are

## Damaged Spinners

Given the heavy-duty component sizes of today's muskie spinners, it's common for things to get bent. If you're having difficulty getting blades started on the retrieve, especially after catching a fish, check clevises for bends. Straighten them back to a perfect "C" shape. Also check the wire shaft for bends. In extreme cases, it may be necessary to rebuild the lure with a new wire shaft, or replace worn clevises with new ones.

Sometimes the blades themselves become misshapen, often bending inward or folding over. Thinner blades bend most easily—and a bent blade usually won't run or rotate properly. A lure damaged like this can be fitted with new blades.

Stamina, Jann's Netcraft, and Rollie & Helen's Musky Shop are sources for lure-making components, including preformed wire shafts.

the original "burner" bucktails, as productive today as ever.

On the Mepps website you can listen to the unaltered sounds of various Mepps lures underwater, including the Musky Killer. Mepps doesn't provide the specific pitch or frequencies of their lures, but the sounds offer insight into the underwater world of muskies and let us speculate about why they might respond to different blades. You can hear the difference between the willowleaf blade on their Giant Killer and the Colorado blade on the Musky Marabou.

Finally, the Colorado rotates at about 50 degrees from the shaft, offering the most distinct thump and the slowest rotational speed. Many anglers believe that the low pitch of

Colorado blades draws muskies from the greatest distance because they can either hear or feel them better. Place two #10 Colorados together on the same shaft and you have a deep thumping force, perhaps one reason for the recent success of double magnum Colorados.

Outside the spectrum of traditional muskie blades are newer hybrid styles like the Esos WilloBeast, a wider version of a willowleaf. The WilloBeast is a #11, built with brass alloy in .028 thickness that is said to yield more flash with less resistance on a retrieve.

Hatchet-style blades also offer a distinct thump. This blade style, available through Stamina Tackle, is offered in sizes up to a #8 in .025-gauge metal. Not in wide use in muskie fishing, hatchet blades start up and turn easily, rotating well at slower speeds.

According to Schwartz, one new blade with potential is the Turtleback Colorado, available through Metalworks Stamping Corporation. The #10 Turtleback is made from .029 stainless steel, a compromise that Metalworks president Dale Wehman likes for its versatility. The .029 adds just a little more weight and a bit more rigidity than a .025, so it won't bend as easily during extreme use. It's also a bit easier to cast and retrieve than the heavier gauges.

The Turtleback incorporates three deep grooves into the steel that produce a sharply angular effect, reflecting light in many directions. Both Schwartz and Wehman think this blade produces extra flash, more noise, and a more definitive presence underwater.

## Muskie Blades

### BUILDING THE PERFECT SPINNER

Luremaker Don Schwartz spends countless hours experimenting with the various components that make up an inline spinner. Here are some of his conclusions regarding design and function.

- Use a bigger clevis for bigger blades. A larger #6 or #8 Easy Spin Clevis turns more freely on the wire shaft, offering minimal friction and maximum blade freedom.
- Use a short piece of shrink tube between the shaft and terminal treble hook, which keeps the hook straight back, preventing it from flopping around on the retrieve. This hook positioning yields better hooking percentages.
- When making your own bucktails, position the clevises and blades an inch or so down the wire shaft from the line tie to give the blades more thump.
- Use larger hooks on your bucktails—5/0 and bigger. Smaller hooks tend to lodge deeper in a muskie's mouth, where the potential for harming a fish increases.
- Use longer-shanked trebles with beaked or curved points whenever possible. An Eagle Claw L374 is an ideal bucktail hook.
- For the wire shaft material, use .050-inch diameter wire. Thinner wire facilitates vibration.

# "LAST SEASON SCHWARTZ FOLLOWED (AND WAS FOLLOWED BY) **THE FISH**—A REAL BEAST OF A MUSKIE, LARGE ENOUGH TO CAUSE HIM SLEEPLESS NIGHTS"

## Thumpertails

Big thumpertails such as Kalin's 10-inch Big 'N embellish many of Schwartz's creations, most notably his beloved Big Darla, which we'll talk more about in a moment. Additionally, in designing the TrainWreck Spinnerbait, Schwartz used an 8-inch Berkley PowerBait Saltwater Grub—which also adds scent to the equation. Inlines like the Buchertail Mogambo Combo and the Figure 8 Big Mama also sport big plastic flappers.

"A wide flapping twistertail is another element that can make a good bait better," Schwartz says. "I'm not sure it isn't the real key to Darla's success. The tail distracts fish from any negative cues present in the rest of the bait, including the hooks. I also think the plastic body adds fish profile. So when I select a tail, I go with wide tails that give more thump.

"Bulk means additional water resistance, so you may also need to add extra weight to the lure shaft to keep the lure running at the depth you want. And don't overmatch your blades with too large a grub. The blades should always win the vibration battle.

"Legendary muskie angler George Wahl taught me about the importance of having a hinge in a bucktail," he says. "Wahl was the first to do it, with his Eagle Tail. Combined with a large plastic grub as a trailer, the hinge allows the bait to pivot and wobble on the retrieve. Meanwhile, the big blades stabilize everything, keeping the bait tracking straight. Whether it's a vibration thing or a visual thing, I can't say. All I know is, big fish seem to like big plastic tails."

Which brings us to the Darla. Last season Schwartz followed (and was followed by) *the fish*—a real beast of

a muskie, large enough to cause him sleepless nights. "We raised this fish numerous times on other baits, returning to check on her over the course of several weeks," he says. "But even after showing her many different lures, we just couldn't get her to follow."


On one of those sleepless nights in his lure shop, inspired by thoughts of *the fish*, the Darla was born. "Next trip, I return immediately to where we last saw the big fish. On the first cast with Darla the fish comes right to the boat, we do-si-do through two turns on a figure-eight, and she opens her mouth and eats. Just eats." Reliving the moment, Schwartz says: "Sometimes, muskie fishing is just that simple." ■

*In-Fisherman* Field Editor Cory Schmidt, Nisswa, Minnesota, has been writing for *In-Fisherman* publications for over a decade.

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