

# video

## **An underwater camera brings new thrills to musky trolling**

By Ted Pilgrim

**T**wo seasons ago Don Schwartz set out on one of the more remarkable musky fishing journeys in recent history.

He succeeded.

A lifelong musky fanatic and lure inventor, Schwartz conceived an idea that transformed his regular trolling routine into an interactive video-fishing system. No longer was he simply towing lures around the lake. By attaching an Aqua-Vu underwater video camera to a downrigger ball ahead of a trolled lure, Schwartz bore witness to some unbelievable musky behavior. Along the way, he learned more about the actions of lures, structural layout, and musky response than he ever imagined.

"The System," however, didn't begin as a musky experiment at all. Prior to season opener, Schwartz passed the time chasing lake trout. "The first time I lowered the camera on the downrigger and started trolling, it absolutely blew me away," Schwartz said. "I was watching lakers follow and attack lures trolled a few feet back. It amazed me, too, that certain fish would follow for long periods of time,

without striking.

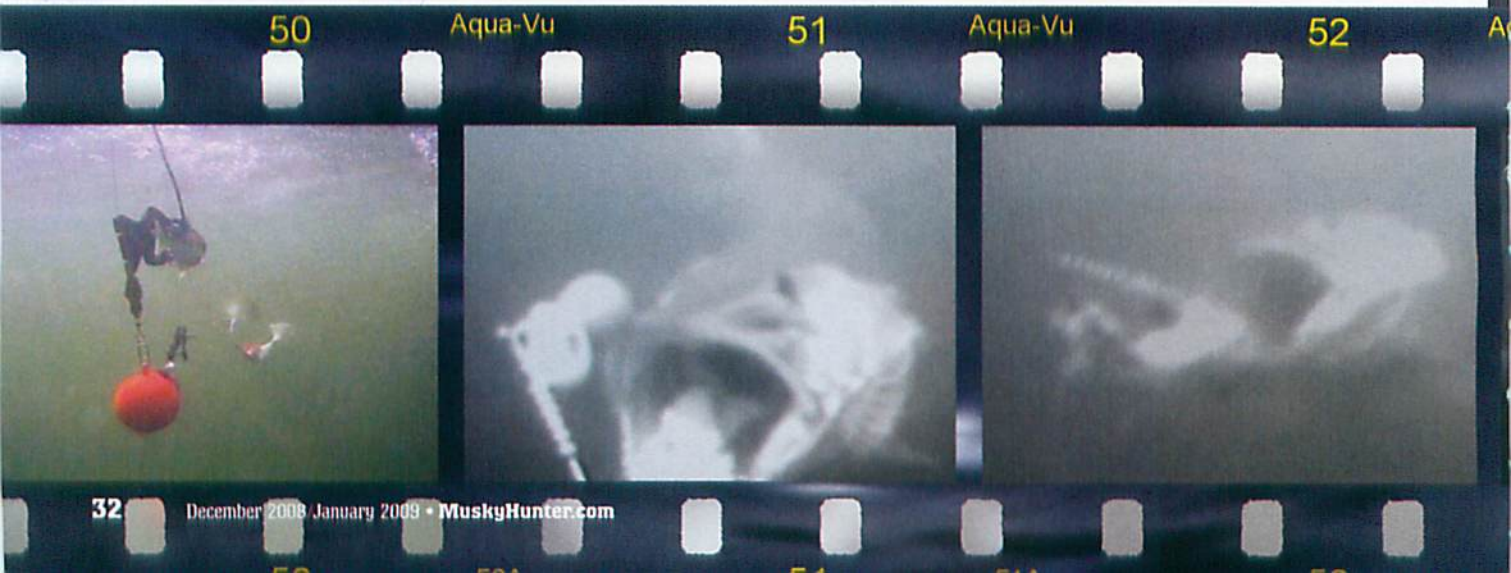
"Well, as often happens while doing anything but musky fishing, I started thinking about musky fishing. Trolling. Doing the same thing with muskies that I was doing with lakers. I absolutely knew that this system would work for my musky trolling. I mean, can you imagine if trolling for muskies were just as visually exciting as casting?" he pondered. "Mostly, I couldn't wait to see a musky strike at eye level. How many people have ever seen that before?"

That season, Schwartz recorded dozens of video clips of live follows, strikes, and other acts that simply elude description. Some of the footage really does depict "never-before-seen" type stuff. Muskies charging downrigger balls and boat propellers; following lures for over a half mile, off structure and into deep open waters; nudging baits with wicked snout swoops, examining lures as if to smell them; chasing intensely anytime the downrigger ball hit rocks, and so much more.

Video-trolling for muskies, as it turned out, was everything Schwartz imagined and more, adding a jolt of electricity to an otherwise ordinary trolling routine. Beyond the thrill of watching muskies react to different lures, though, a host of other unanticipated benefits to using the camera soon emerged.

### **Interactive Trolling**

This visual thing with muskies — that you see them while casting, and can execute boatside maneuvers that often convert interested muskies into eating muskies — remains the core of the species' appeal. Adding this visual reaction factor to your trolling program is an advantage that simply cannot be dismissed.



# Trolling



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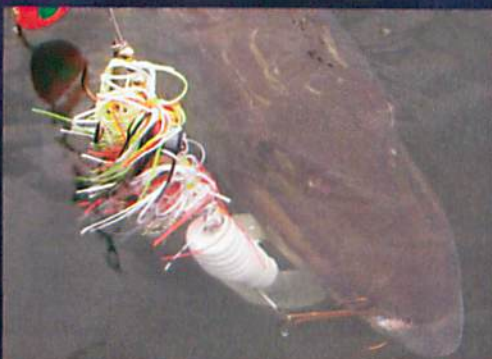
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Aqua-Vu

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## Video Trolling

"Initially, I didn't even consider that the real benefit of video-trolling would be that I could react instantly to the actions of following muskies. You can't do this without the camera because you're just never sure when a musky is following. I can speed up, make a sharp turn, grind the ball into bottom, track tight to contours by raising and lowering the downrigger ball — interact in all sorts of ways that might make a following musky eat. And by recording the footage and studying it, I can learn what moves work best in many different situations," Schwartz digresses. "I can't believe more fishermen aren't doing this."

### Setting up "The System"

Schwartz's Aqua-Vu DVR unit, which connects to the underwater camera, proves invaluable, letting him record the action, and replay it later

— either on the camera monitor or on his home computer. "Not only do I learn structure and fish response," he says, "but I now know exactly what each lure looks like in the water, particularly their actions at different speeds, and as they collide with bottom. There's just no other way to learn these types of things."

The system begins with an underwater camera, such as an Aqua-Vu Explorer 7. (Next season, he will experiment with a Motorized Aqua-Vu.) He connects the camera optics to the cable of a small portable downrigger, just above the downrigger ball, via an Aqua-Vu Cam-Rigger Kit. The camera's lens can be adjusted to aim in multiple angles to keep different lures in the line of sight. In most cases, Schwartz trolls in less than 20 feet of water, often less than eight feet beneath the boat, so a light downrigger ball is all that's required.

"I use a clamp-on manual downrigger with a 4-pound ball. I usually also carry an 8-pound ball for keeping the bait straight below the propwash at faster speeds. At times, muskies really like this," he exclaims. "Just be aware of the depth and structural layout in the areas you troll the 8-pounder, or things can get dicey. Be ready to crank up a few feet if you start seeing bottom on the monitor, especially boulders. You don't have to keep the bait in the propwash, though. Sometimes the 4-pound ball is nice because it lags further behind the prop at faster speeds."

Once the camera's connected, attach your fishing line with an Off-Shore OR8 Heavy Tension Downrigger Release. Pinch the line just above the leader swivel. "If you're running super-braid," he notes, "double-wrap the line into the release."

"People don't believe how close to

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the ball muskies will strike until they see it happen. I use a standard 9- to 12-inch wire casting leader that positions the lure less than a foot from the ball. Muskies are not afraid." Schwartz says with a grin, "When a musky hits, the bait pulls free from the clip and you're into a crazy green fish. Sometimes, it's just that simple."

Above the water, Schwartz uses 8 1/2- to 10-foot medium-heavy power trolling rods, something like a Shimano Talora TLA-86MH-2. Load a Garcia 6500 with 80-pound test PowerPro, and you're set. Although Schwartz prefers superbraids for their high tensile strength, I've suggested that he consider monofilament, such as 50-pound Berkley Big Game. With so little line between fish and rod, stretch is non-existent, and eventually, a lost giant could break his heart. But real musky men like Schwartz learn their lessons through sheer drama, and

knowing this, I don't press the issue.

Place the rod into a holder now, and engage the baitclicker or loosen the drag before lowering the ball. Do not lower the downrigger ball with the reel in freespool or you'll learn the real meaning of backlash. Instead, shift the motor into gear, and begin dropping the downrigger ball while thumbing line off the reel. This is a lot simpler than it sounds and is really no different from what Great Lakes salmon trollers do everyday.

Once you're trolling, monitor ball and lure depth in one of several ways: watch the continuous signal on your sonar screen that signifies the ball, follow the line counter on your downrigger or fishing reel, or ideally, use an underwater camera that displays camera depth on the screen. Some systems also display water temperature at depth, another key factor at times.

## Video Revelations

Above and beyond the instant interactivity and entertainment value of video-trolling, the camera has also revealed for Schwartz some intriguing discoveries regarding structure, musky behavior and response.

About structure and musky position: "When I started trolling with the camera," Schwartz revealed, "one of the biggest unexpected benefits is that I learned exactly what the bottom looked like in all of my key musky spots. Not just a sonar interpretation of structure, but the actual visual layout. The camera would show, for instance, the size and shape of boulders on a point, maybe a patch of pondweed. And often, you could see exactly how a musky positioned itself on this point, and the way it used cover elements to its advantage while stalking your lure. Now, every time I fish one of these spots — whether I'm

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casting or trolling — I immediately visualize what's below. This is a huge benefit for approaching each spot. I now feel I have a big advantage over any other angler fishing these areas."

Along these lines, Schwartz has also often found muskies while trolling with the camera, only to return later and catch them casting. "One of my bigger fish from last season was a musky that followed my TrainWreck spinnerbait while trolling. A day later, I returned and caught the fish casting the same lure."

A final observation involves the way muskies position relative to wind-driven current. "Nearly every musky I viewed and recorded during higher wind conditions, whether a curious follower or a willing biter, showed itself on the calm side of islands or reefs. I saw very few muskies on spots with lots of windblown waves crashing in," he stated. Equally revealing is that Schwartz also noted in his journal that when wind subsided, he would again start seeing muskies on what had been the windblown side of the structure. "It's not like I avoided trolling in wind," he asserts. "In fact, I usually did just the opposite. Now I think I might have been getting beaten up for nothing."

## Contact Triggers

Lots of fishermen know that banging bottom with lures often turns muskies on. The camera has confirmed this for Schwartz, as well. "With a downrigger ball banging around down there, you get to really play with this idea. I like to get in real tight to those ticklish spots on rock reefs, such as a 3-foot spine protruding off an island. I've watched a lot of muskies on camera, follow or strike just after the ball bangs that last rock before dropping deeper.

"A 'rigger ball is the ultimate banging tool," he says. "As you'd suspect, getting close and personal with these hazards creates some really violent confrontations between the downrigger ball and boulders. What you see on the camera screen in these situations will blow your mind. Everything just goes haywire, camera and ball bouncing, hammering rock and stirring sediment. You can almost feel the rocks, like body blows in a boxing match. The lure digs in, smacks rocks and bounces left and right. It's really amazing how much abuse a lure takes back there. Along about this time, you'll watch as a big fat musky materializes beneath your lure. Sometimes, your heart skips a beat.

"When a musky approaches, the worst thing you can do is to slow down. Muskies don't have brakes. If you slow down, the musky often just shoots straight past your lure under the boat. She'll rarely return for another look. Instead, throttle up the speed, say from 2.5 to 4 to 6 mph or more and, if possible, drop the ball back into the rocks. Whether it's the sound of the collision, the sediment that plumes off bottom, or the interruption in lure movement that triggers strikes, I do not know," he says. "But there's just something compelling about these collisions that crank muskies up."

For Schwartz, the ability to instantly change depth with the downrigger — hugging contours up and down with any lure — remains a key element in the game. He's absolutely convinced that physically contacting bottom with the downrigger ball — particularly solid structures like ledge-rock or boulders—triggers muskies. After seeing the footage, there's no point in arguing. Many of Schwartz's video clips depict muskies like heat-seeking missiles, materializing behind trolled baits immediately following one of these collisions.

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tom across shallow structural elements, the deep open basins where muskies often swim are tailor-made for video-trolling. The downrigger yields precise depth control, an absolute key element to open water trolling. Imagine the possibilities.

Spinnerbaits are tremendous trolling baits. "Despite lots of time pulling classic trolling plugs, the first strike I captured on camera was with a big spinnerbait," he stated. "Since then, I've triggered many more strikes on camera — every one of them with a TrainWreck spinnerbait. There's definitely something to this.

Schwartz continues: "Lots of times with plugs, muskies seem more interested in checking out the boat's prop or the downrigger ball than the lure. I know some people will think I'm goofy, but the underwater footage tells the story.

"The deal is, spinnerbaits just haven't often been placed into the right depths while trolling, so we really never knew how well muskies would respond to them in a classic trolling scenario." While diving plugs employ lips that yield built-in depth control, spinnerbaits plane toward the surface when trolled, especially at the higher speeds associated with musky trolling.

Keeping a spinnerbait down — forcing it to track bottom contours as a crankbait does — requires additional weight. By running a spinnerbait behind a downrigger ball, you can place it in direct contact with bottom, grinding into boulders and rock walls, plowing trenches into sand, and ripping through weeds.

"I believe muskies have one of the most well-developed lateral line systems among freshwater fish," he states. "They are highly tuned into vibration, sound, and perhaps, even scent." Schwartz's footage depicts muskies that appear to be scenting these lures as a dog sniffs an unfamiliar hand. "Something about the TrainWreck's big thumping blades, coupled with its wide flapping PowerBait tail that plays on muskies' senses. And I'm increasingly convinced that scent plays a larger role than any of us realize.

"I've certainly recorded many muskies following classic trolling plugs like Grandmas and Believers, but the only lure they've eaten on camera is the TrainWreck." While Schwartz won't tell you this without prodding, his largest on-camera musky was an immense 54-incher, a fish that gulped the TrainWreck late last fall.

"Observing muskies on the camera and studying the footage later isn't just about fun," Schwartz maintains. "It reveals so many key clues that will greatly expand your understanding of musky activity and their habitat. You can repeatedly watch how certain fish react to different baits and speeds, take note of specific lure actions, and learn exactly what each spot looks like from a fish's perspective. There's no other way to gain so much knowledge so quickly. I'm now trolling with much more precision, and much more confidence, than I ever thought possible. And I'm always engaged in what I'm doing, what I'm seeing — makes time between fish pass a lot faster."

Schwartz pauses now to reflect on his crazy, remarkable quest. "Honestly, after doing this for couple seasons, sometimes while getting beaten up in some pretty nasty weather, I've never been more excited for next year. Ever. Learned more than I ever thought possible. Caught more muskies, too. Can't wait to see what new stories these monsters have to show me. I'll be watching."



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