

Hawgs On The Rampage

Lessons Learned From Tournament Points Anglers To Huge Walleye!

by
Dave Kidd

It isn't often that anglers, of either the professional or recreational ranks, have difficulty producing at least a few fish from the lake that is known as the walleye capital of the world. In mid April of 1996 many of the pros practicing for the North American Walleye Anglers (NAWA) season opener on Lake Erie were, at best, struggling. After a week of, well, frustrating pre-fishing for stubborn fish in heavy seas causing muddy water, forecasts for the tournament catch looked bleak.

This was the earliest professional walleye tournament ever held on the big lake. With the water temperature hovering around 42 degrees, locals were reporting catching a few "jacks" (male walleye) off of the reefs northwest of Port Clinton, but the large females

came few and far between.



Hawgs like these are common in Lake Erie's Western Basin in the Spring.

"Did they spawn? Are they spawning?" These questions raced through the minds of the competitors as they jigged, rigged, and trolled their way through painfully few fish during each practice day.

Jim Stedke, a local competitor from Lima, Ohio, had the good fortune of being able to draw from an experience that happened a number of years ago. He knew of a large school of fish that could annually be found suspended over the flats in an area east of the reefs during the early season.

"About four years ago, around April 10th, I was heading west toward Round Reef," Stedke explained. "On a whim I decided to stop the boat approximately 2 miles short of the reef and set out some boards with crankbaits to see what I could pick up. I was instantly rewarded as the first two fish in the boat were both over 28 inches. I can remem-

ber telling everybody I came in contact with that I had caught two, huge, male walleye. I believed so because the fish were not full of eggs and their undersides were not marred," he continued.

Upon his return home he realized while he was cleaning them that they were not males but females who had spawned at least two weeks earlier, perhaps even before the ice came off.

"These fish were suspended high in the water, I mean 10-14 feet down, in April no less. I was more than a little surprised to say the least," he concluded.

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On the day before the tournament Stedke managed only 5 fish, a result that disappointed him, having caught fourteen just a few days earlier. Many of his competitors would have been happy with such a catch so close to the first day of competition. Perhaps the pre-tournament predictions would be correct.

The "Rules" Change

Walleye are said to spawn when the water temperature reaches the low 40's. During the prefishing period and the tournament itself the walleye were indeed spawning and this accounted for the number of jacks on the reefs.

It has long been taught that immediately after spawning, female walleye lie, belly to the bottom, on the expansive flats of the western basin. This is true to a point. After a few days of rest from the

rigors of spawning, some of these fish will begin to suspend in the open water north and east of the reefs - feeding on schools of emerald shiners. Since the population of Lake Erie walleye is factored in the millions, the entire spawning process may take several weeks. This would explain why some females that anglers catch are "spawned out" while others are real hawks, stuffed full of eggs.

By tournament time the water temperature had risen to the mid 40's. Not much of a change you say? Those anglers working these areas on day one were pleasantly surprised at how much this temperature change affected the fishing.

"If I had my doubts on how I would do in that tournament, day one set my mind more at ease," stated Johnnie Candle, then a resident of Ohio, now residing in North Dakota. By trolling a combination of lures including the Reef Runner Rip Stick, Candle culled up a 6 fish limit exceeding 50 pounds placing him in 4th. place after the first day of what was supposed to be a three day competition.

Similar results were echoed by a good number of participants who were on that bite. Surprisingly, even in the cold water, many anglers reported that their fish were hitting the baits at speeds up to 3 m.p.h.

Day two was more of the same with many anglers handling up to 30 fish to get their limit approaching the 50 pound mark. Day three

was a disaster as 50 plus m.p.h. winds and monstrous waves reeked havoc on both boat and angler forcing the tournament director to call the competition. Even in the midst of threatening seas many anglers brought in their expected weights of 50 plus pounds only to be told that the competition was off. The second day leader, Ron Seelhoff would stand as the tournament winner.

Hawg Time

It's almost spring again and during the next series of weeks the walleye in the western basin of Lake Erie will again go on the rampage. In order to better inform you as to the whereabouts of these fish and how to catch them, I've asked Ross Grothe from Apple Valley, Minnesota, the second place finisher of the April 1996 NAWA tournament, for some tips.

"Once the water temperature climbs into the mid 40's start looking for fish suspended in clear water about 11 to 15 feet below the surface in 25 to 32 feet of water," instructs Grothe. "During that tournament I initially found the fish north of the A and B buoys of the Camp Perry Firing Range. The fish were moving east on a daily basis, by the end of the tournament I was northeast of the C buoy." He continues, "Somewhere between these two points you're bound to hit fish."

"When you find suspended fish set out medium depth crankbaits such as the bait I used, the Reef Runner Rip Stick," Grothe explained. Other baits worth trying are Storm

Thundersticks and Rapala Husky Jerks. Grothe went on to say that a Rip Stick that is run 80-120 feet behind the boat will dive to 9-12 feet, perfect for intercepting hawg walleye. Utilize in-line planer boards to spread your baits and increase your coverage.

Experiment with speed, typically starting out around 2 m.p.h. and ranging up to 3 m.p.h.

It's just a matter of days. Who knows? The ice is off and the fish may be active right now, just waiting for a bait to swim by. Use caution, staying on shore when the beast roars and fishing when it purrs. It's hawg time.

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tickets. My favorite crank baits are Storm Deep Jr. Thundersticks, 1/4 oz. Hot'N Tots and #7 Rapala Shad Raps. Colors run the gambit with dark colors seeming to be preferred in low visibility water conditions and fluorescent and flashy colors performing best on bright days with clear water.

The Lake Erie walleye spawning phenomenon has a profound effect on the fish. With millions of trophy walleyes cruising around Lake Erie's western basin, anglers have an unbeatable opportunity to put a walleye on the wall or just catch a

bunch of eaters for the table. With limits set at 10 walleyes per angler in both Michigan and Ohio, fishermen can go home with enough walleye fillets to make a trip well worth the investment. Armed with a working knowledge of the latest tactics, a seaworthy vessel, modern equipment and up-to-date fishing information, walleye anglers have never had it so good.

Additional Information

For up-to-date fishing reports, wave heights, current tendencies and many other useful Lake Erie fishing facts, visit the Michigan Fishing Information page at <http://members.aol.com/mifishinfo> on the internet. Also, pay a visit to www.walleye.com. Of the dozens of charter boats that operate in the western basin, only a handful offer early spring trophy walleye trips. One operation that specializes in catching the biggest walleyes that Erie has to offer is Trophy Specialists Fishing Charters. Phone them

at 800-305-6988. Captain Rocco Papandrea can be reached at 219-262-3370. Monroe, MI lies in the heart of the western basin's spring walleye action. For a list of Monroe's accommodations, area attractions and other trip planning details, call the Monroe Chamber of Commerce at 734-242-3366.

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If the winds do not cooperate trolling will also work. Trolling should also be done with close contact to the bottom and at a very slow pace. Vary your spinner colors and types. As an example, try using blue, green or silver spinner blades on a sunny day and use colors like red, purple or pink on cloudy days. Planer boards are also very effective because your lure will not be traveling behind the wake of the boat. Walleyes tend to be spooked very easily which accounts for the success of planer boards. If there are a lot of boats in an area trying to move to a different location because the presence of all these boats will quickly spook the fish. If you decide to come up and give it a try, call J. Hanley at 716 549-2232 or W. Elliott at (716) 681-0253 for up-to-date conditions. Good luck
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