

Lake Erie Small Planer Board Basics

by
Mark Hicks

Before the Zebra Mussel invasion, boats could often troll right over walleyes in the murky western basin and not spook them. Now that countless mussels filter the water and drastically increase its clarity, walleyes are proving less tolerant and more elusive.

Clear water has long challenged anglers in Lake Erie's central and eastern basins, and the problem grows more acute as the zebra's bring about increasingly transparent conditions. Fishing deeper isn't always the solution, because walleyes commonly suspend less than 35 feet deep, even when the bottom plunges to 80 feet or more.

Walleyes that suspend near the surface in clear water tend to scoot away from a boat passing overhead and escape the lures trailing behind it. Your depth finder may mark few fish, yet there could be scads of them swimming out of your path. One of the most effective methods for getting a lure out to boat-shy walleyes consists of trolling with small planer boards that connect directly to your lines.

In-line boards typically measure-

less than 10 inches in length. Their small profile doesn't intimidate walleyes, and their beveled noses propel them and the lines and lures they carry away from the boat.

SMALL BOARD BASICS



Clockwise from top: Off Shore Side-Planer; Rapala; Hot 'N Tot; Bomber 24A; Deep Jr. Thunderstick; Ripstick; Rattlin Rogue.

Setting out a small planer board presents a simple chore. With the boat moving ahead at trolling speed, let a lure out behind the boat as far as you deem necessary.

Next, engage the reel, grasp the line above the rod tip and place the

rod in a holder. Connect the board to the line using whatever attachments come with the unit, usually two pinch-type line releases, or a line release followed by a wire guide. Be aware that some boards come designated for the right or left side of the boat, and they are not interchangeable.

After attaching the board, pull the rod from the holder, drop the board into the water and feed line as it swims out a distance of roughly 50 to 100 feet. The board's bright color, typically yellow or orange, makes it easier to spot.

Then, engage the reel and place the rod back into its holder. The rod should rest in an upright position. This helps hold the line to the board out of the water and improves strike detection. Keep an eye on the board and the rod tip to determine when a walleye has taken the bait. The key indicator is when the board slides backward.

REFINED SMALL BOARD TACTICS

As with any fishing technique, skill and knowledge determine the level of success with small boards. Trolling them randomly produces inconsistent catches. Refined presentations, such as those used by noted professional walleye

angler Gary Parsons of Chilton, Wisconsin, are deadly.

Walleye anglers nationwide concede that Parsons is the master when it comes to small boards. He has elevated the technique to almost an art form, and deserves much of the credit along with his close friend Keith Kavajecz, for introducing this tactic to Lake Erie.

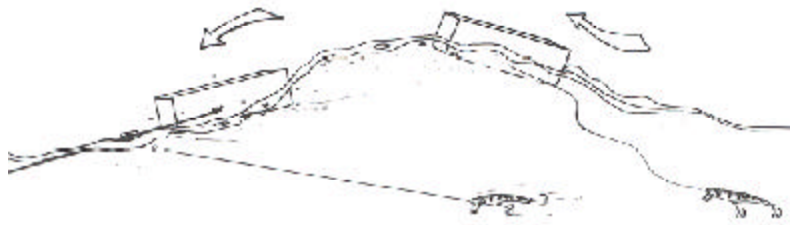
“What Keith and I did on Lake Erie,” says Parsons, “was help popularize slow-down trolling techniques for post-spawn, deep-water females. Lake Erie had never been exposed to that approach before.”

Over the past several years, Parsons and Kavajecz have fished many walleye tournaments on Lake Erie. They have aptly demonstrated that slow trolling with small boards produces excellent catches in the western and central basins, spring through fall. Their methods should work equally well in the eastern basin.

THE PLANER BOARD

In-line planer boards have been around for quite some time, but many of them don't work well with the slow-trolling methods intended for walleyes. Parsons has designed popular boards for several manufacturers and knows which features bring about a superior performance.

“I've been part of the evolution of walleye boards,” claims Parsons. “When I mention small boards, most people automatically think of the ones designed for salmon trolling at high speeds. They don't



A lure stalls when a small board climbs a wave and darts ahead when the board slides down.

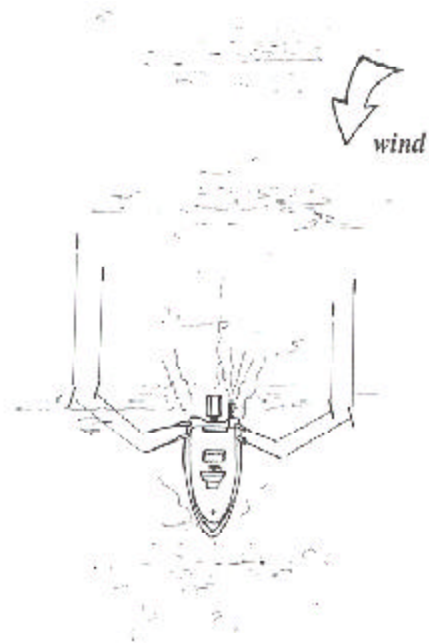
work worth a darn for walleyes. says.

“We troll so slowly that our boards need to be ballasted so they stay upright. Salmon boards, which are not ballasted, tend to fall over at low speeds.”

These days, Parsons tows the ballasted (bottom weighted) Off Shore Side-Planer. In addition to its balance, the Off Shore model features two snap release connectors. They quickly attach and detach from the line and also help the board track true.

When fishing with a partner, Parsons frequently pulls four boards. He says he can take the motor out of gear to land a big walleye, and the remaining three boards hold their positions and stay upright.

“There's no flipping over and no tangling of lines. They just track right out there as you drift,” he



Gary Parsons always trolls boards with the wind.

LURE SPEED

In April, Parsons scores well on

heavy, post spawn walleyes in the western basin trolling at a .8 to 1.2 m.p.h. A 9.9 to 15 h.p. auxiliary outboard on the transom of his Tracker walleye boat lets him maneuver at crawl speeds.

Considering that walleyes tend to be lethargic in the cold water of early spring, the slow pace seems appropriate. As the water warms above 50 degrees, most Lake Erie anglers increase their trolling speeds. Not Parsons. He stubbornly sticks to his inchmeal pace, even when the water climbs to 70 degrees.

The only time Parsons trolls faster is when Erie's walleyes get on a strong spoon bite during the heat of the summer and on into the fall. Spoons require a faster speed to achieve an effective action.

"Day in and day out," says Parsons, "the most effective troll is a slow troll. I firmly believe that the majority of the time-other than in the heat of the summer-the fish are triggered much more by a change of speed than they are buy speed alone."

LURE ACTION

Envision a crankbait swimming steadily through Lake Erie's crystalline water. Even at a depth of 30 feet, enough sunlight filters down to reflect off the lure's bright sides. At some point, the flashing rhythm grabs a walleye's attention. The heavy fish abruptly whirls about, closes on the lure and then tailgates inches behind it for several seconds. Eventually, the walleye loses interest and turns away.

Now reconstruct the same

scenario. But just before the walleye turns away, give the lure a sudden stop-go-action. The erratic movement triggers the walleye's strike reflex and the fish nabs the bait. It is this sudden change in action that Parsons strives to impart when trolling.

"Small boards are the absolute best way to do that," stresses Parsons. "When the board races down a wave and stops, it passes that action directly to your lure. And that speed change is a lot more dramatic when you troll at a slow speed. The tow line on a big ski board absorbs some of the shock, so the action is not near as dramatic as with a small board."

To determine just how much action the fish prefer, Parsons may start out running flat lines along with his board lines. The boards, dancing up and down the waves, generate the most energetic lure response. One or two other rods in holders pull flat lines and provide more subtle actions. The remaining flat line rod lays across the bottom of the boat with about a foot of its tip sticking out. It sustains the most subdued lure motion.

"That gives you three different stop-and-go presentations at the same time," says Parsons. "There are times when the rod on the floor catches all the fish, times when the flat lines in the holders are better, and times when the boards-especially on calm days-just cream everything."

TROLL WITH THE WIND

One rule that Parsons sets in stone is: "Always troll with the wind." This maneuver simplifies boat

control and spurs small boards up and down waves with the liveliest action. A flat, calm day makes for poor trolling, because there are no waves to bring the lures to life.

On blustery days, Parsons may pop his kicker outboard in and out of gear to slow the boat. Under extreme conditions, the wind propels the boat and the motor is used only for steering.

The moment Parsons hooks a good walleye; he marks the spot by entering a waypoint in his GPS. After landing the fish, he may continue trolling in the same direction another 500 yards. If no other strikes ensue, he quickly pulls in all the rods, circles around and upwind of the waypoint, and makes another pass through the same area. He continues making passes until he stops catching fish. "If there's one big walleye there," he says, "you can usually milk three or four more big ones out of that same area. Some schools are tight. You just can't continue trolling for 2 or 3 miles after you catch a fish before turning around."

TACKLE

Parsons and Kavajecz designed a 7-foot graphite trolling rod-part of the Team Daiwa series-that works well with small boards. The medium-heavy rod withstands the resistance caused by a board, plus its trailing weight and lure, without bowing too deeply.

"I don't know that graphite is extremely important," says Parsons, "but the rod's got to be stiff enough that it doesn't bend over to the point where you can't read it."

“My rods retain a moderate bow, so I don’t always have to scan the water and pick out the board. A lot of times, I can glance at my rod tips and know I have a fish on, especially with the big walleyes in Lake Erie. They just double a rod over.”

Parsons relies on Daiwa S627LC line counter trolling reels to put lines out at specific distances and perfectly duplicate productive settings. He fills the spools with 10-pound Trireme XT.

KEY SETUPS FOR SMALL BOARDS

During a two-week period in late March and early April, Capt. Al Lesh of Warren, Michigan, has a field day trolling small boards in the western basin. Lesh concentrates on shorelines east and west of the Maumee River and loads up on big, post-spawn females in shallow water.

“I troll only about 50 yards off-shore,” says Lesh. “I run small planer boards right up near the bank in 5 feet of water. I’ve seen walleyes up to 14 pounds come out of that skinny water.”

Subtle-action minnow lures swim about 100 feet behind Lesh’s boards on 10-pound test monofilament. The shallow running Bomber 15A and No. 13 Rapala. Lesh’s favorite lures in this situation, wobble freely above the bottom.

The big walleyes soon vacate the shallows and join hordes of other post-spawn females in deeper, western basin waters. Trolling for

these fish with small boards throughout April and into early May presents a prime opportunity for catching limits of heavy fish. At this time, Parsons scours the western basin with his LCG, searching for walleyes out to depths of 40 feet.

“The depth varies so much from year to year,” says Parsons, “that you have to let your graph dictate what you should be trying. You find a location that’s holding fish and note how deep they are. Sometimes they suspend only 10 feet down.

“You put together potential setups that target the approximate depth zones where you’re marking fish. You don’t know if any of those fish are walleyes until you catch the first one. If you get a second bite and a third bite, you can start putting together patterns. Tournament fishermen call them programs.”

SPRING PROGRAMS

Shallow running minnow lures, such as Storm’s ThunderStick, and Jr. ThunderStick, Smithwick’s Rattlin’ Rogue, and No. II and No. 13 floating Rapalas, comprise the basis for Parsons’s early spring programs on Lake Erie. He first establishes the most productive trolling depth. After that, he refines lure speed, lure action and lure color.

The old trick of making “S” curves helps determine whether the fish want a faster or slower trolling speed. When a boat turns, the outside boards speed up, while the inside boards slow down. If strikes come consistently from the

faster or slower side, Parsons adjusts his speed accordingly.

When Parsons first came to Lake Erie nearly a decade ago, lead core line furnished his primary means for getting minnow lures deep. Today he favors the simplicity and flexibility of Snap Weights. The essentials of lead core trolling and the Snap Weight System are covered in Chapter 8 of “Lake Erie Walleye”, on basic trolling.

“If it’s calm,” says Parsons, “I put out nothing but boards. If it’s rough, the boat doesn’t bother the walleyes as much, so I put out flat lines and boards. In the latter case, the boards mainly spread the lines to cover more water.”

Once he settles the boat down to an appropriate trolling speed, Parsons lets out minnow baits with Snap Weights that pull the lures down to the level he wishes to cover. He uses weights from 1/2 ounce to 8 ounces. A small board, however, can only carry a weight up to 3 ounces, which is enough to pull a minnow lure down into the 40- to 50-foot range on a long lead.

After letting the lure back 50 to 100 feet behind the boat-sometimes only 30 feet in murky water-Parsons snaps a weight to the line. He then lets out an additional 20 to 10 feet, depending on the depth he is trying to achieve. At this point, a rod intended for flat line trolling is placed in a holder. Otherwise, a small board is first attached to the line and allowed to swim out away from the boat. When a walleye nails a lure on a board line, both the board and the snap weight must be removed as

the fish is reeled in.

Though Parsons counts on slender minnow lures in the spring, many other anglers also catch walleyes pulling spinner rigs with small boards. As the water warms and walleyes become more active, Parsons makes extensive use of spinner rigs and wobbling crankbaits, such as Rapala's Shad Rap, Storm's diving Jr. ThunderStick and Hot'N' Tot, and deep diving Bomber Long As.

These lures have performed well for him in both the western and central basins. When starting the day, Parsons commonly trolls a wide variety of lures and lets the walleyes tell him which they prefer.

"I've fished the central basin," he says, "in water out to 80 feet deep. Surprisingly, you get a thermocline that sets up out there anywhere from 35 to 50- some feet deep. The majority of the biting fish are going to be at thermocline level or above, and that's well within the range of small boards."

LANDING WALLEYES

When you notice that a walleye has been hooked, fetch the rod and steadily crank in the board. The boat should continue running at trolling speed. Avoid setting the hook. Doing so may give the walleye enough slack line to escape.

Stop reeling when the board reaches the boat and remove it from the line while maintaining rod pressure on the walleye. Two anglers working in harmony easily perform this task. From this point

on, land the walleye as you normally would.

TANDEM BOARDS

When running two boards off the same side of the boat, space them far enough apart to avoid tangles. A good combination is 50 feet out for the inside board and 100 feet out for the outside board. If the boards tow lures that run at different depths, match the shallower running lure to the outside board.

After hooking a walleye on an outside board, the inside board must be adjusted to prevent the lines from tangling while reeling in the fish. This requires team work.

One angler holds the outside rod that has the walleye, while another angler quickly feeds line to the inside board. When the inside board drops back well behind the outside board, bring the walleye inside and under the line connected to the outside board.

Another option consists of winding up the inside board and placing it on the opposite side of the boat until the walleye is landed on the outside board.

This article has been re-printed from chapter 10 of "Lake Erie Walleye", a book authored by Mark Hicks. This book and its companion, "Lake Erie Smallmouth" are available via Big River Press (see ad on page 19).

Try This Walleye Recipe

Walleye Florentine

21 oz Frozen spinach, cooked per
2 lb Walleye fillets
1 1/2 c Court bouillon
3 tb Butter
2 tb Flour
1/3 c Cream
1/2 c Grated Swiss cheese
Salt and pepper to taste
2 tb Grated Parmesan cheese

Instructions

HEAT THE OVEN TO 350F. Make the spinach according to package directions, and drain in a colander, pressing with the back of a spoon to extract as much liquid as possible. Place the fish fillets in a baking dish, and bring the court bouillon to a simmer on the stove. Pour the liquid into the baking dish, cover with a sheet of buttered wax paper, buttered side down, and bake for 5 to 7 minutes. Drain the cooking liquid, and reserve. Melt the butter in a saucepan over low heat. Add the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 3 minutes. Whisk in the reserved cooking liquid, and bring to a boil. Add the cream and cheese to the sauce, and stir until smooth and bubbly. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Preheat an oven broiler. Stir half the sauce into the spinach, and arrange the spinach on an ovenproof serving platter. Arrange the fish on top of the spinach, and then top each fillet with some of the sauce. Sprinkle the Parmesan on top of the sauce, and place under the broiler for 1 to 2 minutes, or until lightly browned. If assembled a day in advance, refrigerate covered. Then, rather than boiling, heat dish in a 350F oven until hot, about 15 minutes.

Serves 6