

Tips for Reading In-Line Planer Boards

by
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I had just completed setting out a 4th Off Shore Tackle Side Planer when my youngest son Jake looked at me with a puzzled face and asked, "Dad how do we tell when we have a fish?" An elementary but important question, reading or detecting strikes when using in-line boards isn't an easy concept to explain or grasp.

I thought for a moment and then answered, "When a fish grabs our lure, the board will jerk backwards in the water." The look on Jake's face suggested he wasn't sure exactly what to expect next. I went on to

explain that the weight of the fish pulling and fighting against the board causes it to jerk or pull backwards in the water.

By watching and comparing to the other boards, it's pretty easy to tell if a board has hooked a fish.

The truth is it's pretty easy to tell when a fish is hooked on the Side Planer board. Pretty easy so long as the fish is good sized, you're trolling straight downwind, the boat doesn't turn and you happen to see the strike the moment it occurs!

Unfortunately there are times when even a seasoned troller can drag fish he didn't know was hooked. Small fish are tougher to detect because they aren't big enough to cause the board to react violently or in an obvious way. Quartering into the waves (instead of trolling straight with or into the wind) also makes it more difficult

to read in-line boards. When a fishing boat quarters the waves it doesn't enjoy a steady and smooth course. The wind turns the boat, forcing the driver to constantly adjust his course. The boat moves forward but is actually swinging back and forth along an imaginary



centerline. The trailing boards follow the boat, swinging back and forth instead of following a steady and straight course.

Each time the boat turns toward one of the boards the line goes a little slack and the board sags backward slightly, then recovers when the boat turns again and the line pulls tight.

If a fish is hooked while the boat is in a subtle turn there's just enough slack in the line to prevent the board from showing obvious movement. The weight of the hooked fish does cause the board to sag backward, but it's easy to miss even if you're an experienced troller. Eventually the boat will pull straight or turn the opposite direction. When this

happens the board with a fish attached always seems to be lagging a little behind the others. The rule of thumb is to always check lines that are sagging a little or don't look just right. It only takes a minute or two to check the line and be sure you're not dragging a small fish or a fouled lure.

Turns are the toughest place to detect strikes on inline boards. During a turn the outside lines speed up while at the same time the inside lines stall and slow down. Of course the trailing lures do the same thing, helping to trigger strikes.

If a fish is hooked on an outside line, it is usually pretty easy to detect because the board is moving in a steady path. It's the inside boards that are stalling that are tougher to read. Often a fish hooked on the inside lines isn't apparent until the boat straightens out again. A fish hooked on the inside lines often prevents the board from pulling back out to the side properly once the boat straightens out. Again, a board that always seems to be lagging behind is a tip off that something is wrong.

How Far Do I Run My Boards Out to the Side?

It's also easier to detect strikes when the boards are fished within 50 - 75 feet of the boat. When the boards are let out 100 or more feet away from the boat, slight changes in course cause the

boards to momentarily stall and start, making it more difficult to tell if a fish has been hooked. This is especially true if the target fish are small.

Running the boards a little closer to the boat makes subtle changes in how the board is running more obvious. However, there's obviously a point of diminishing return. Fishing the boards too close to the boat defeats the purpose of using boards in the first place. Running the boards 50- 75 feet out is a good rule of thumb when you're first learning how to read planer boards. Once you get a little experience, I'd recommend running the boards out 75-100 feet. Many of the top walleye pros run their boards as far as 150' out to the side.

TROLL WITH THE WIND

Trolling with the wind makes it easier to read the boards, no matter how far out to the side they are fished. In a following sea the boards' run smoothly and in a predictable manner. When trolling into the waves, the boards jump around, leap out of the waves and otherwise hop all over the place. While this board action can trigger strikes, reading these strikes is tricky for even those anglers who have considerable experience fishing in-line boards.

LOW STRETCH LINES HELP

Using low stretch lines such as the super braids or fused lines makes it very easy to detect hooked fish on in-line boards. Because the line doesn't stretch, anything that touches the lure causes the board to react accordingly. When fishing low stretch lines I recommend using the new Off Shore Tackle OR-18 Snapper Release that's designed to hold this thin and slippery surfaced line securely.

Snapper releases are sold individually and can be installed on most in-line boards.

MATCHING UP LURES

Certain lures pull harder in the water than others. Matching up lures that generate similar drag or pulling resistance allows the board to run in a more uniform manner that's easier to monitor. Avoid running a deep diving lure with lots of drag next to a shallow diving lure with little drag.

TATTLE FLAGS

No matter how good you get at reading in-line boards, there will be times when a small fish or fouled lure is dragged around. The ultimate solution to this problem is the OR-12TF Tattle Flag produced by Off Shore Tackle.

The Tattle Flag is a spring loaded flag kit that allows the flag to fold down when a fish is hooked. The Tattle Flag is so sensitive even a crank bait that's fouled with a piece of weed causes the flag to fold to half mast. Never again will you drag a small fish or fouled lures with the Tattle Flag.

Designed as an after market kit, a Tattle Flag can be installed on an OR-12 Side-Planer board in about five minutes. The kit comes complete with a flag, spring/linkage assembly, two OR-16 Snap Weight clips and the necessary hardware.

Reading the boards is part science and part intuition. If for any reason you suspect something is wrong with the way a board is running, take a few seconds and check that line. The bait could have become fouled on something floating in the water, picked up a weed or a cluster of zebra mussels. It's better to check immediately than to drag something around, twisting the line in the process.

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