

# Hook, Fight and Net Walleyes Like a Pro

by  
Captain Michael Veine

It never ceases to amaze me how some anglers manage to catch any fish at all. It seems like poor fish fighting and netting techniques run rampant on Lake Erie and other Great Lakes waters. Thousands of walleyes are unintentionally released every year by anglers that haven't refined their fish fighting techniques. Here are some pointers that will put more hooked fish into your boat.

## Fishing Tactics to Improve Hookups

Hooking up solidly with fish in the first place is always the first critical step. Needle sharp hooks should be at the business end of every walleye angler's line. I sharpen mine with a hook honing stone. The hooks on nearly all my walleye lures also receive a minor modification. I bend the hooks outward slightly to better catch the mouth tissue of the fish. This modification should only be used when sticky sharp hooks are maintained and with strong hooks as well.

Minimizing line stretch results in more solid hooksets. Trolling with shorter setbacks will ultimately increase the bite to hookup ratio. This is the main reason why I attach rubber core sinkers in front

casting, keep casts close to the boat allowing the natural fluttering action of the lure to entice strikes, while at the same time improving hookup rates.



**Donna Veine waits for Roger Poore to reel the planer board to her so she can remove it. Michael Veine photo**

of all of my trolled crankbaits. It allows me to reach deeper depths with less line out. I also use heavy, low-stretch lines for crawler fishing with bottom bouncers, my primary walleye tactic from May through summer. Even when casting or jigging, hooksets become much more consistent with less line out. When jigging, try to keep your lines as vertical as possible by using a heavy enough jig. When

giving the line slack. Walleyes, and especially trophy class fish, are famous for clamping down on the bait with their bony mouths so hard that the hooks will not penetrate solidly. If the fish feels a jerk on the line and then gets slack, it will realize something is wrong and just spit the bait out; say goodbye. With steady pressure though, the fish will usually continue to hang on. We keep the rod in the holder

## Hooksets

Setting the hook properly on a walleye is critical. When trolling properly with inline planer boards, the fish should be allowed to hook themselves. Most walleye pros agree that the proper way to fish inline boards is so they never release and stay positively attached to the line. When a fish first hits an inline board setup this way, resist the temptation to jump up and yank on the rod. Jerking the line will just bounce the board across the surface

until the walleye pulls the board as far back as possible.

At that time, maximum tension is being exerted on the line and I can also determine if other lines may need to be cleared to allow the fish to be brought to the boat without tangles. When the board stops dropping back, we simply reel the fish in slowly and smoothly without any jerking or pumping. When reeled in smoothly, the board will glide to the boat without bouncing and submerging. The angler continues to reel the board in until it can be detach from the line. When doing this I stand up on the rear casting platform of my Lund while the angler either sits down or bends at the knees lowering the rod tip down so I can reach the board.

Even when I'm removing the board, the angler keeps reeling in the fish with the rod tip held high in the air. This keeps the fish moving towards the boat as smoothly as possible while keeping maximum tension on him at all times. The drag is set lightly to allow retrieval, but only at a slow pace. With this constant tension method, when the walleye does one of his famous headshakes, the hooks will simply bury deeper into his mouth.

I also keep trolling when a fish is being retrieved, which allows better tension on the line, keeps the fish in the back of the boat and also allows the other remaining lines to hook up with those coveted multiple hook-ups. I will slow my trolling speed down though if needed especially when trying to net the fish.

### **Tournament Winning Refinements**

All of my trolling reels are the same

Daiwa LC47SG line counters that feature a star-drag. Out of the box, I take the reels apart and give them a thorough degreasing. I then apply quality, lithium grease to the gears, drag system and clicker. This simple process will smooth out the mechanisms allowing more efficient fish retrieval.

A star-drag is the best system I've found for serious, experienced anglers to subdue walleyes and other Great Lakes game fish. Still, star-drags drive me nuts on charters because inexperienced clients usually wrap their knuckles around the knob inadvertently bumping the star drag, which loosens it up and allows line to pay out resulting in lots of lost fish. For this reason the clicker always stays on in my boat unless the angler has proven to me that he or she is cogniscent of gripping the knob by the fingertips. Savvy anglers always remove their gloves for this reason as well.

The clicker on all the trolling reels that I've tested tend to impair the efficiency of the drag system.

Stated simply, with the clicker off, the drag system is much smoother and will catch more fish. With a savvy angler at the rod, the clicker should be turned off as soon as the rod is pulled from the

holder with a fish-on.

When fighting walleyes during tournaments, you want to retrieve the fish as quickly as possible, while minimizing the chances of loosing the fish. To accomplish this, I increase the star drag tension while bringing the board to the boat. You can get away with this because of the stretch in the line and the shock absorbing action of the board, which further cushions any action that the fish may take. When my partner is removing the board, I thumb the drag back a little looser. With a star-drag, quick adjustments can be made by an expert without upsetting the reeling cadence. As the fish gets closer to the boat and line stretch decreases, I loosen the drag even more. If the walleye is bulldogging below the boat, the drag is set so loose that line can only be gained by pulling the rod up and reeling down while keeping constant, steady tension on the fish at all times. This is the only time I use a conservative pumping technique on walleyes, when the fish is straight down. If the fish makes a run, I lower the rod and even use my body to absorb the



**This big walleye was Todd Staffords fish of a lifetime so careful attention was paid to fighting techniques. Michael Veine photo**



**Proper netting technique can put more walleyes in your cooler. Michael Veine photo.**

shock and the loosely set drag also keeps the tension constant. Some walleyes will inevitably be hooked by the skin of their lip and this conservative fighting technique will prevent those lightly hooked fish from tearing loose.

When the board is being retrieved, I always keep the rod tip high with the rod butt held at a 90-degree angle to the water. Once the board is removed though a decision needs to be made. If the walleye is on top of the water and is not fighting too hard, then I keep the fish up and get him to the boat as quickly as possible by quickening my reeling pace and keeping the rod tip high.

If the fish is a fighter, then I stick the rod out to the side of the boat at a 90-degree angle to the stern and keep the rod tip as close to the water as possible. This way the fish is encouraged to take his fight underwater where there is less of a chance of him throwing the bait. As the fish nears the boat, the rod is raised upward to a horizontal, 90-degree position, which usually brings him to the surface and the

waiting net. If the walleye stays down throughout the battle, then the most efficient fighting position is with a horizontal rod in the 90-degree position.

Also, by keeping the rod tip high or out to the side of the boat, if fish does manage to spit the bait, those dangerous hooks won't fly into the angler or other passengers in the boat. I have several scars caused by impaled hooks due to negligent anglers that failed to keep their rod tips up or to the sides.

### Netting Fish

Proper netting techniques start with a good net. I use Cummings nets exclusively. My walleye nets have an 8' long handle and a basket that is 2' wide. The net bag is deep and the nylon mesh is rubber coated to facilitate hook removal. I consider this sized net to be ideal in my 22' Lund or any smaller boat for that matter. If I were fishing from a larger vessel though, my net would be longer, but the hoop size would remain the same. Walleyes tend to be spunky fish around the boat, so a smaller hoop size allows quick net jobs especially when the fish gets around the motors. I have tried salmon sized nets twice that size, but they just don't work nearly as well.

My nets are all equipped with an Offshore pinch pad clip attached

about 8-10" from the base of the hoop. The clip holds the end of the net-bag and releases it when the weight of the fish hits the net. This little enhancement will prevent hooks from snagging into the net bag at inopportune times.

When fighting a walleye to the boat, care should be taken to keep the fish away from the motors. I run a kicker motor for trolling on my boat, which is mounted to the port side of my main outboard. I almost always direct the fish to the starboard side of the stern when trolling, which keeps the fish away from the prop-wash. When walleyes hit a prop-wash, it tends to blow them back and they could be lost as a result. If the fish won't cooperate and go to the starboard side, then we try to bring him to the net along the port gunnel away from the kicker prop-wash.

When netting a walleye I always wear safety glasses to protect my eyes from flying hooks. Unless it's really rough, I typically perch myself on my rear casting platform when netting fish. This allows me to get right on top of the fish and reach out behind the motors. As the walleye nears the boat, I always point the net right towards the struggling fish. This way, if the hooks come loose, the net acts like a shield. I've saved myself from dozens of flying baits with this technique and it also positions the net for a quick and efficient net job.

As the fish comes within striking distance of the net, the angler should smoothly pull back on the

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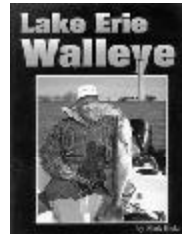
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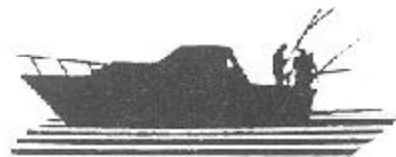
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rod; sometimes taking a step back is all it takes to bring the fish straight into the net. With a quick dip, the fish is scooped up. I then raise the net hoop above the water and work the long net handle back up the center of the boat far enough until I can back up off the casting platform and set the fish down on the casting deck for hook removal.

One of the biggest mistakes that I see netters make is to stick the net in the water and expect the angler to pull the fish into the net. This improper technique results in untold numbers of needlessly lost fish every year. I've literally netted tens of thousands of walleyes and other game fish over the years, so if you have any questions, [mikeveine@trophyspecialists.com](mailto:mikeveine@trophyspecialists.com) is my email.

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progresses, you may see yellow perch schools moving in closer to the shoreline, so some might be available to anglers out on piers and in the bays. Most of the fish this year are running from just under 8 to around 10 inches, but if you are lucky you can run into a school of jumbos that average 11-12 inches. Their light, mild flavor has made them a Midwest favorite as a dinner or a sandwich. Check out some of our [favorite fish recipes](#).

Yellow perch populations have rebounded from low levels seen in the mid-1990s, thanks to some good hatches and wise, cooperative interagency management. Recent high-quality hatches seen in 1998, 2001, and now 2003, will help keep the perchin' great for years to come. The current sport fishing regulations for yellow perch in Ohio's waters of Lake Erie include only a daily bag limit of 30 fish per angler. There is commercial fishing (trap netting) for yellow perch in Ohio waters of the lake. The commercial fishery is regulated by individual quota in the western and central basins of the lake. Sport fishers are reminded to be on the look out for and avoid commercial nets when fishing this fall.

*Reprinted from the Ohio Division of Wildlife web site*

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specific edge that you have selected. If the walleyes are directly below and concentrated on a physical edge you can backroll a livebait rig, jig, or a bottom bouncer rig, keeping the bait among the fish you see on the depthfinder. If you find the fish strung out along the edge, keep the bait moving and they will bite. If they're clumped up in one spot, hover over them and vertically jig them.

Rocks also attract fish, try rocky shorelines. Rock piles, humps or where rocks and weeds meet or are intermixed, work it over thoroughly with a jig or live bait presentation. Try to determine where fish are holding. Keep asking yourself the question what is their pattern? Constant bottom contact is essential even though it increases the potential for snags. Use a small jig head with a wide hook gap to deliver the bait in wavy conditions. Leeches are an outstanding rock bait because they can take the pounding. Drifting the breakline on a windy day is a way to catch trophy walleyes. The tackle is simple and the methods are easy to learn. First, use jigs tipped with a crawler, leech or minnow. The size of the jig should be just enough so you have contact with the bottom. For example, on a river like the Mississippi, I prefer to use 1/8 ounce or 1/4 ounce jigs. The important factor here is the shape of the head. The head of the jig should be round or a stand-up type of jig. This design helps when you are in an area that has snags, especially in timber or rocks. When I am on Mille Lac, I might switch to a lighter jig, spinner or a live bait floater.

With the cooling temperatures and the rough and tumble weather of fall don't put that boat away just yet, get out and fish the edges for some fall transitional walleyes. You might be surprised at the wallhanger you hook into.