

After the Fight, Treat 'em Right

Contributed by Bob Chochola
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Often overlooked in the relentless struggle to catch a muskie is the back half of the Muskies Inc. mission - the proper release of a muskie. I have caught enough fish over fifty-inches to know that if the best part of muskie fishing is the strike, the second best part is feeling the tail tense-up in my hand and then watching a healthy fish kick out of sight. That's what it's all about...

Every muskie hunter obsesses over his or her pursuit of the great toothy beast. Like an NFL star would the Lombardi Trophy, or an NHL's Lord Stanley's Cup, the coveted prize in this sport is the mighty muskie. While an organization like Muskies Inc. indeed has its tangible awards of merit handed out at chapter gatherings across North America every year, the real "trophy" of any muskie hunter's heart is to hold a behemoth in a photograph shared, touted, and yes, even boasted about for years to come. A photograph that represents much blood, sweat, and tears through hours-and-hours of planning, fruitless outings, sleepless nights, and relentless casting.

It is certainly true that muskie hunters do dwell on the object of their affection probably more than most, but after all it is because the rewards are so great – and so rare. The promotion of catch and release has transformed the "fish of ten-thousand casts" from a mythical creature that only a select few learned scholars and river rats can catch with any kind of regularity, to a rewarding adventure for even a relatively inexperienced angler if a little homework and then some heavy lifting are applied. But after all that is said and done, with as many big fish fifty-inches and more that have been caught and released over the past few years, these encounters are still far less common than all the "braggin' boards" on internet chat sites would lead one to believe.

That said, it is a special occasion to be holding a monster muskie at the bow of the boat, while your partner snaps pictures of your triumph: just you and that big fish with the golden sunset as the perfect backdrop.

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A few late season reports of severely mishandled muskies made it clear that it's about time for a refresher course on proper handling of muskies – from hook-up to release and everything in between. So, let's have at it, shall we?

{mospagebreak title=2. The Net}THE NET

Before you even think about starting the motor and heading out, assume you will catch the biggest muskie of your life today (go ahead, it's good to always begin with a positive attitude), then ask one question: Do you have everything you need to perform a release safely with minimum stress on the fish and risk of injury to you? You wouldn't leave without the lifejackets and there are other items you should also never leave shore without.

Skipping past hand landing (or water release) for obvious reasons – no one in their right mind intentionally grabs a four-foot long fish with razor sharp teeth knowing full well there is a lure with three 5.0 treble hooks embedded in the jaw. For this only one bit of advice will do: know where the nearest medical attention can be found. A typical water release is performed by first playing a fish out to total exhaustion – not recommended. After twenty years of experience, I now have occasion to actually pop hooks with the long pliers at boatside, foregoing pictures (and without ever actually touching the fish), for the sake of the fish. But then there's reality.

After that enormous strike and fierce battle with jumps and power dives and the occasional awesome tail-walk, you're going to need a solid muskie net with a coated bag. Each fight is unique and it takes experience to know when a muskie is ready to be bagged. Always expect the unexpected and be prepared for that last power dive to throw the lure – you don't want it stuck in your forehead.

Beckman makes one of the best nets on the market, with a tough treated hookless bag that won't leave you with a tangled mess if the fish decides to "barrel roll" and a handle tough enough to lift the weight of a big muskie. The stiff bag easily serves as a "pen" that you can use to corral the muskie in order to LEAVE IT IN THE WATER while you remove the hooks and get your camera ready. Time out of the water is the key to survival and it cannot be over-emphasized to keep the fish in the water as much as possible while you work.

A Cradle works even better as it supports the muskie in the water and when closed around the fish, it immobilizes your catch for the duration. A Cradle has a very soft muskie friendly mesh that won't remove the protective slime coating on the skin. Be advised: a Muskie Cradle may not be effective for bigger fish in the low-fifty-inch range or larger

(I've had big fish escape and a couple that didn't fit because the Cradle wouldn't close around them — not that I'd brag).

{mospagebreak title=3. Hook-Outs}HOOK-OUTS & BOLT CUTTERS

Simply put, you cannot hunt muskies without certain tools. If you do, the probability you will be hurt, or that death or injury to the fish will result, increases dramatically. There are four tools you should never leave the dock without:

- 1.) Hook-out
- 2.) Small bolt cutters
- 3.) Jaw spreader
- 4.) Heavy duty long-nose pliers

Of course, it is ideal to simply "pop" the hooks with the hook-outs or pliers, but every year lures get bigger, hooks get stronger, and it gets harder to remove them without overdue stress to the fish. That's where the bolt cutters earn their place in the box — if hooks are hard to reach, or in a vital place, cut 'em. Replacement hooks are cheap.

{mospagebreak title=4. Lights, Camera, Action}LIGHTS & CAMERA & ACTION!!!

Before you remove the muskie from the net, make sure your camera is ready to go and your partner knows how to use it. It's always a good idea to have a camera training session before you ever hit the water — if everyone learns all the camera gear in advance, it'll save valuable time on the water and will most likely improve the quality of your shots.

This is a critical time when most mistakes are made and the greatest danger to the captured fish occurs. **NEVER LIFT THE FISH INTO THE BOAT WITH THE NET!!!** Removing the fish from its environment and placing it on the bottom of the boat (in or out of the net) will remove the protective layer of slime from the skin that prevents bacterial infection. A fish placed at the bottom of the boat will most likely begin to thrash and there's a good chance injury will occur when the fish gets tangled in all the lures and gear in your boat.

Once hooks are removed and the fish has calmed down in the pen, it's easy to place your thumb underneath the strong jaw bone — point thumb towards the head of fish - then carefully slip four remaining fingers up under the gill plate taking care not to damage any of the vital organs. **ALWAYS SUPPORT YOUR FISH UNDERNEATH THE BELLY** with your other hand when removing it from the water. A strong grip on the jaw bone should immobilize your catch and will give you a better leverage grip just in case, but cradling the belly lends support and will further freeze your subject for the photo. Take a couple of quick snaps of the shutter and then get that muskie back in the water.

A good alternative grip would be to grab the tail and then slip your other hand under the belly. This works well with smaller fish, but if you have substantial weight and length to control, a slippery fat tail isn't the best place to grab. One thrash and you have an angry toothy beast at the bottom of the boat.

{mospagebreak title=5. A Measure of Time}A MEASURE OF TIME

By now plenty of stress has been placed upon the muskie and it should be top priority to set the fish free. Dropping, or tossing, the muskie overboard is not the right way to treat a creature that has just given you the thrill of a lifetime and then was gracious enough to stick around posing for photographs.

Carefully return your fish to the water keeping your grip and supporting the belly all the time. Once the fish is in the water upright she will let you know if further attention is necessary. If she kicks and swims away, then it's good for you. Many times the trauma of the fight leaves excess air in the swim bladder. She may turn on her side or flip upside down. You can hold her upright and "burp" her by gently rubbing her belly from the rear fin forward.

Once she is upright in the water, hold a firm grip on her tail while slowly rocking her side-to-side in a swimming motion. Gently push her forward (never backwards) to get water flowing over her gills. This often gets the fins moving and the gills flaring again. Keep rocking and you'll feel the tail muscles tighten and try to kick. A gentle push usually does the trick from there and she'll be off for the weeds to rest. Stick close to the area for a while just in case she surfaces — you may have to recapture and repeat this process a number of times.

Measurements are often taken during this revival time and a floating tape measure will serve well obtaining length and girth. Weight can be determined by formula and it is unnecessary to place the fish under additional stress using a scale, as most muskie hunters brag by inches anyway.

If you really want to get a ballpark on the weight use this formula:

$(\text{girth} \times \text{girth} \times \text{length})/800$

Example:

LENGTH = 45.0

GIRTH = 21.5

$21.5 \times 21.5 \times 45.0 / 800 = 26$ POUNDS

{mospagebreak title=6. Always be Prepared}ALWAYS BE PREPARED

Your partner screaming, "Fish On!" isn't the time to start to wonder if you remembered the bolt cutters; the camera; where you stuck the net. If you grab the net and thirty-seven lures are tangled in it and the soft cooler with today's lunch is at the bottom of the bag — well, then you've got problems. Not the least of which will be a very angry partner if the muskie gets away while you're trying to undo the damage.

There are muskie hunters who have got their act together — tools in one pre-determined compartment, camera in dry storage, and lures away except for maybe a half-dozen in use and well away from the net. Net will be situated for quick release and easy one-step assembly.

Then there are those muskie hunters who leave for a day on the water with more tackle boxes full of lures and unnecessary gear than five people could use in a month. By lunch they have a treble hook nightmare as far as the eye can see — hooks in the net, stuck in the deck carpet, and hanging from the sides of the boat. They have rain gear and gloves and coolers stacked on top of things they might need — like the net or the dry store hatch. Where's the camera again?

Be those boy scouts. Always be prepared. Never take what you don't need. If you have been muskie hunting for any length of time you have enough gear to sink the Titanic, but you can find and catch big muskies just by sticking to the eighty pound weight limit that many fly-in camps require for a week's stay.

Keep it simple. The sure way to make everyone think you are "in the know" is to be organized and keep a tidy deck out on the water. If you don't have it narrowed to a three lure attack by day five you are having a bad week anyway.

{mospagebreak title=7. A Final Word}A FINAL WORD

Remember that the second best part of muskie hunting is the release — running a very close second to the catch. Muskie hunters owe it to the species that occupies so much of their lives to make a conscious effort to carry the proper tools, equipment, and knowledge necessary for the preservation of the sport.

Learn how to handle these fish with care. They are big, nasty, and the true top predators of fresh water. Muskies' greatest ally is also ironically their greatest potential enemy. It is up to muskie hunters everywhere to catch and release if we are to continue to grow the sport as we did through the first forty years of Muskies Inc.

With every new generation of muskie hunters to come, let us live for the fight and possess the will to treat 'em right.

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