

Oh My, What Do I Do Now?

"What to do if the monster Muskie hits your lure at Shabbona Lake."

By Denny Sands

A lot of anglers lay awake the night before a planned fishing trip. They are excited about "WHAT IF" that trophy fish strikes my lure. We all say it will never happen to me, yet we all secretly wish it would. We lay awake, just dreaming about the possibilities. Sometimes, we even wake up our spouses when we set the hook unexpectedly, while in the in-between stage of day dreaming.

But what if, just what if it should happen to you! Are you prepared! It has happened to 4 State Of Illinois Muskie Record Holders fishing at Shabbona Lake located in Southern DeKalb County. Is 5 your lucky number?

During the past two weeks anglers have been having a very lively and informative debate on Shabbona's Lakeside's Web Site, "www.shabbonalake.com", Fish Tails Discussion Page about catching a Muskie. The topic was started after an angler, fishing for catfish, caught a 48" Muskie. Thinking it was a possible state record, he sought help to get it weighed and verified.

Lots of questions and comments followed on how to handle the situation of being lucky enough to catch a potential state record, or just a big Muskie. Just what should one do or not do. After intently reading all of the comments, and of course participating in the discussion myself, it lead me to write this article.

While I know I am setting myself up for some potential criticism from someone who is bound to not agree with 100% of what I write, I feel it is a topic that a lot of novice fishermen would like to know more about. I would encourage follow up articles by others. As we learned on the web site, there is plenty of strong opinions out there about handling Muskies.

The first thing to do after hooking a Muskie is to prepare yourself and your boat for as smooth as possible landing of the fish. There will be sudden realization that hits you, that YES, this could be it!!! Be prepared mentally for this BEFORE it happens. By reading this article and hopefully others, we can help make that magical moment everything you dreamed about.

You can not call 911 for help, you must do it yourself. As you day dream, include these steps in your dream. First close that open tackle box, clear an area where the Muskie will be placed in the boat (if this is your plan) and preparing yourself mentally to over come the fear of such a huge fish. The last step is the hardest. Muskie have teeth and they look lean and mean!

Years ago, in Northern Wisconsin and in Canada, guides would carry a gun and literally shoot the large Muskie or Northern, while it was still in the water. I even heard reports, they would get over excited and shoot the fish in the bottom of the boat. This, of course, would cause their boat to take on water and possibly sink. The bullet would go through the fish and through the bottom of the boat, ripping a large hole in the boat. Yes, believe it or not, that is true! No fish story!

The reported best way to handle a truly large Muskie is to leave it in the water in a specially designed Muskie Cradle. The cradle is designed to float in the water. It has two wooded sticks that float and net that sinks in between the sticks. The sticks are marked in inches for easy fish measurement and they are usually about 60 inches long. The Muskie is maneuvered to the side of the boat, while the cradle is slid underneath. The Muskie never leaves the water, as the hook is removed. This leaves the protective slim on the fish's skin, not on the bottom of a boat. After a short revival of the Muskie, a successful release is almost guaranteed. But most fishermen, who catch a Muskie, do not have a cradle with them. The next best procedure is to have a net big enough to handle a Muskie, if you catch one. Again, if you leave the Muskie in the water, that is preferable. Here again, most will not have that large Muskie net either. So now what? This is what the average fisherman wants to know. Now What? He has no cradle. He has no large Muskie net. And he can not call 911 for HELP! What should he do?

Play the Muskie up to the side of the boat. Most Muskie will lay on their side from exhaustion. This is when they are most vulnerable and also when they are the most dangerous. When you get the Muskie next to the boat, carefully try to get the head end of the Muskie in the net. This may require two or three attempts. If you are lucky enough to have a partner, and you have the Muskie's head partially in the small net you do have, have your partner gently cradle the main part of the Muskie body. Jointly lift the Muskie out of the water together in one continuous movement. But, watch out!!! Even though that Muskie is exhausted, he will get a surge of energy, when you go to take him out of the water. Be prepared for this!!! If you are not, you will hurt yourself and/or the Muskie. He has teeth and you've got a large lure in his mouth. Both can quickly cause major damage to you, your partner and the Muskie. Do not be shocked when the Muskie resists being taken out of the water. Be prepared mentally for this, so you can handle what ever the Muskie does. As you, as gently as possible, get the fish into the boat, be prepared for round three. The Muskie will not like the bottom of your boat. He will get another surge of energy. So be prepared in advance! Here again do not get hurt or hurt the Muskie. He will calm down relatively quickly. Photos can be taken while the fish is laying on the bottom of the boat. Just lay a ruler or some object next to him to use as a guide to how big he is. Some comments were made about having a boat bottom prepared with a wet cloth or rug to minimize the loss of the Muskie's protective slim. But in all probability, you will not have a spare rug with you. If you want to be in the picture, you can kneel down next to him. If you want to pick him up and hold him for a photo, this is where a controversy comes in. With experience you can hold the head end and support the tail end for a nice photo. Unfortunately, unless you have someone with you that has handled

Muskie before, this is very hard to do properly, considering the circumstances and your excitement.

Always, keep in mind that time out of the water is very hard on any fish. Whatever you are going to do, do it quickly and efficiently. As soon as possible get the Muskie back into the water. Keep him upright so that he gets his equilibrium back. Hold him by the tail, keeping the tail under water also. Gently move him side to side and back and forth very slowly. This helps him breathe. As he gains strength you will feel it. He will let you know when he is ready to take off.

The feeling you will have upon that release is beyond words to explain. I'll guarantee you will not be able to sleep the night after the big event! I may not even sleep tonight, dreaming about what I just wrote. Don't forget to congratulate yourself and whoever helped you. (PLEASE! PLEASE! PLEASE ! After the fish is released, not while the fish is still in the boat.)

Moments like these are what we fish for. There is nothing like catching that first really big fish the first time. Whether it is a Muskie or not, it is something I wish everyone reading this article could experience!

Just remember, when you're dreaming, it really could happen to you!!! Will you be prepared? Is 5 your lucky number? You may be the 5th State Of Illinois Muskie Record Holder from Shabbona Lake!