

Chain O' Lakes PWT Day 2



“Boat twenty-eight, you’re good to go!” shouted the tournament official on the marine radio. And with that, walleye fishing pro Gary Darling jammed the throttle forward and his big Ranger boat was on plane in seconds, hurtling across wakes from the other boats as we sped away from Haling’s Resort, headed toward the Grass Lake Road bridge.

I held on to my hat as we closed in on 60 mph., and looked backwards to see a giant rooster tail of water blasted toward the sky by the prop of the 225 horsepower Evinrude outboard motor. Darling had a honey hole in mind, a secret spot, and we wanted to get there first. In the jargon of local anglers, he wanted to “Jones-out any other hooblers” who might be headed for the same spot.

It was Day Two of the In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail Tournament on our local chain of lakes.

We blew past a slower moving Lund boat which contained another pro and his amateur co-angler. Darling slowed down for the no-wake zone around the Grass Lake Road bridge, jammed forward the throttle once again when clear of it, and bore down on the Rt. 12 bridge to repeat the process. It seemed like controlled NASCAR to me, and I loved the speed and excitement of it all.

The start of a PWT tournament is thrilling. All 120 boats stage outside the marina headquarters, in this case, Haling’s on Grass Lake. The boats are divided into three flights, so 40 take off in each flight. On this day, Darling and I had drawn the first flight.

When we arrived at his chosen location, only one other boat was there. But within a minute, about seven other rigs pulled in, creating close quarters for the pros and co-anglers intent on pulling in some good walleyes.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked Darling, who is a police officer in the sheriff’s department in Fort Collins, Colorado, during non-tournament times.

Why did I ask that question of my fellow angler and boat partner? Because PWT tournaments are “boat” tournaments, meaning the total weight of the fish caught by the two anglers in the boat counts for each angler. So, it was in my best interest to do whatever I could to promote the catch of our boat.

“I’m going to be up in the bow, using the electric trolling motor, and will keep us on top of the fish. The wind will be blowing and the current will be pumping, so it will take all my attention to keep us exactly in the right position,” said Darling.

“What kind of knots do you tie?”

“Gary, I can tie several, like the improved clinch and Palomar.”

“The improved clinch is no good. Tie Palomars.”

“Okay.”

In the PWT tournaments, the pro is in-charge so you listen to him. And one unique feature that makes these tournaments different from all others is that each co-angler is paired with a different pro each

day. Computer sampling techniques are used to determine pairings. As you might expect, every day is a different experience.

On Day One, for example, I was paired with pro David Andersen of Amery, Wisconsin. He's a contractor when not fishing the PWT, and builds custom homes. His boat is different, too. It's a Warrior, with a 200-hp. Yamaha tiller outboard, the most powerful tiller model ever made.

Their boats are not only different, their personalities and fishing styles are, too. Andersen was like the "Chatty Kathy" doll of years gone by. We talked about everything.

Darling rarely spoke while we were fishing, instead focusing his energy on the task at hand.

Andersen liked to pitch jigs tipped with minnows toward the shoreline of Fox and Pistakee lakes, landing as close to the edge as possible, and then working them back toward the boat.

Darling chose to drag three-way swivel rigs with minnows in the river, downstream from the bridge stanchions, because walleyes like to hide in the current breaks created by the cement abutments.

So which technique worked better? Well, on Day One, Andersen did not catch a keeper walleye. On Day Two, Darling didn't either. But me, your dependable reporter of all outdoors experiences, I caught a dandy on the first day. That fish put Andersen and me on the leader board. But because the PWT uses a combined boat weight formula, I'm way down in the standings. Heck, I've had NO help from my two pros!

That notwithstanding, it's been a terrific time so far. Pre-fishing with Tony Puccio and Gary Roach, and the tournament days with David Andersen and Gary Darling" what fun and educational experiences. But, some days you catch fish, and some days you don't. That's why they call it "fishing", and not "catching".

Next week, I'll bring you a wrap-up of the tournament.