

## Orawiec



The 5 a.m. alarm shrieked one of those sounds you hate and I pounded the snooze button to turn off the irritating iPhone clock. I lie there in bed, drifting in and out of consciousness, not yet fully awake, and daydreamed about the day ahead. What a day it could be.

I was on Lake of the Woods, Ont., with longtime good friend Mike Orawiec from Zion, IL. On this day, we'd be gunning for muskies, but only BIG muskies were the target.

After a grab and go breakfast, we headed for the boat launch and carefully slid his Ranger into the cooling waters of the one million acres that comprise LOTW. It was late August, so water temps were beginning to drop. It wasn't necessarily the best time of the year for big fish but it was the time we had available.

"Jimbo, I'm gonna take you to some of my favorite hotspots. I will put you on big fish. I can almost guarantee it."

I was so excited that adrenalin leached through every cell in my body. Orawiec is such a complete angler that I thought to myself, "He could take me to his second best spot and I'd be happy."

We pulled up to a point that had boulders and gravel aiming out toward deep water but not before snaking their way through a still-green cabbage bed.

"OMG Mike. This looks good. What are you going to throw?"

"With the water temp being what it is, the fish will still hit pretty much anything' bucktails, jerk baits, cranks, and plastics."

"Will the 'skis be hanging in the deeper water just off the cabbage?"

"Well, you never know for sure but that's where we will start."

I hooked a yellow Smitty bucktail on to my leader and then added a four-inch white grub to one of the treble hooks. I like contrast. Don't know if fish can see colors but they certainly can ascertain shades of gray.

Why a Smitty? They have a big chunk of lead that acts as a keel weight. It allows the lure to run a little deeper than a standard bucktail. Here, the water dropped off quickly from the edge of the cabbage and I wanted the bait to run a little deeper.

I dunno what Mike was throwing and I didn't care. I had a lure perfect for the conditions and one I had caught several nice fish on. I had confidence in it.

On the third cast, it looked like I had a follow but it was a ways from the boat and just off the weed bed. I couldn't tell for sure.

Several casts later, I had a bona fide follow, about a 36 incher or so.

"Jim, let's move to the end of this point. That fish is too small. We want the big females."

Mike positioned the boat so we both had good casting angles. He's really fair about that. My first cast plunked gently into the water about two feet off the cabbage. I cranked it back to the boat at a fairly good speed and when the lure got about two feet away from the rod tip, I was ready to engage the freespool, thumb it, and sweep into a figure eight with one continuous motion.

I never got the chance.

There was a huge boil and splashing water as a big fish pounded on my bucktail. Water splashed my sunglasses as a Muskie bore down on the Smitty and headed for the depths. The big fish hit so hard and so fast that my Muskie rod slammed down on the gunwale with a splintering sound that I knew was not a good sound.

It all happened in a second: big boil, tremendous strike, rod busted, line snapped, lure gone, and fish gone.

Weak-kneed, I sat down and didn't say a word. After a minute or so, Mike softly said, "Jim, that was a big fish. I had a good look at it. Got another bucktail like that one?"

"Yeah, I think so."

So here I am, fishing with truly a world-class angler who has caught muskies over 50#, walleyes over 15#, and smallmouth over 7#. He's a past president of Walleyes Unlimited and a club champion more than once.

Mike is arguably one of the best multi-species anglers in the United States.

You would think I should have caught that fish with such talent in the boat.

"Let's move around the point and come back to this spot later today; give that fish some rest," came the plan.

"Sounds good to me, Mike,"

We reminisced about some of the fishing we'd done together over the years. There were head boat trips to Lake Erie many years ago. And an occasional Lake Michigan effort, catching some beautiful jumbo perch. But the greatest memory was the two trips to Great Slave Lake, banging pike after pike that were 40" and longer. These northerns were suicidal, sometimes busting out of the thick cabbage with the same power and determination my Muskie had.

I grabbed my second Muskie rod, hooked on an identical Smitty bucktail with a white trailer grub, and flung it out. I was still a little shaky from missing that first fish, and I missed my spot by at least ten feet, landing nowhere near the weed edge.

"Nice cast you idiot," I mumbled to myself but when I turned the reel crank for a third revolution, the water boiled, and something pounded the bucktail with a vengeance. "Mike, get the net!!!"

This fish took off for safer places, burning the drag and leaping out of the water and performing a fantastic tail dance before plunging back into the water, spraying it everywhere with the morning sun backlighting the droplets. What a sight!

It was tug and pull, give and take, and combat to combat for what seemed like 20 minutes although I'm sure it was far less. My heart was pumping and thumping as if I were on the Stair Master and I sure didn't want to have Fred Sanfords "Big One" with this beast on the end of my line.

Finally, the angler begins to win out and the fish comes to the boat, seemingly played out with all the greenness spent. "Mike, this could be my biggest Muskie ever. Don't screw it up!"

"Jimbo, trust me, I won't!"

The fish comes to the boat at an awkward angle and Orawiec shouts, "I have to get it tail first!"

"No Mike. NO!"

He scoops it up tail first, lifts the big fish out of the water, and then, with plenty of green still in it, the fish launches itself like a cruise missile, and heads skyward, shaking its head. With the line now slack, a twist of the head sends my bucktail toward me, hits my right leg, and falls harmlessly on top of my boot.

For five minutes, not a word was spoken in the boat. Dead silence.

Then this: "Jim, I owe you one."  
I remained silent.

"We'll go back to the second spot where that big fish broke your rod. Maybe it's active."

"Yeah, sure," I uttered in a barely audible tone.

I picked up the yellow bucktail that had been spat back at me, re-tied the leader and was ready to go.

I started casting but my heart really wasn't into it until Mike had a nice follow. It came right to the boat following his lure, and then very slowly just sank out of site as Muskies sometimes do.

Three casts later I was into my figure eight, clicker pushed in, thumb pressing tightly against the spool when it happened: another big Muskie pounded the lure with intent to kill the bait. I let some line peel off the spool so I could fight the fish. It made three acrobatic moves, one right in front of Mike and he got splashed pretty good. (Served him right.)

After an electrifying fight, the fish came boat side. This time, Mike expertly and deftly landed it. It measured 54 inches and had a nice gut, as if it had just eaten a four-pound sucker or walleye. After a minute or so, I held the fish horizontally in the water for a little bit before it was ready to go, and when it was, it WENT!

"Mike, did you get a good picture?"

"In all the excitement, I forgot."

"You what??"

After another moment of silence, it happened again.

The totally and completely irritating alarm on my iPhone blared in my ear, jolting me out of the deep sleep I had slipped into after punching the snooze button nine minutes earlier.

Oh, well. You can dream, can't you? I wrote this on a snowy, cold, frozen day when the only way I could capture a Muskie was with my imagination.

And I almost forgot. Mike Orawiec is the consummate fisherman, the ultimate prankster, and an excellent boat partner. Netting a big fish tail first: NEVER! Prankster? Hmmmm.

You can write to Jim at [outdoors@zegar.com](mailto:outdoors@zegar.com)