

Reflections of a Champion

By Ted Takasaki
with
Scott Richardson

The glow hasn't dimmed since I won the 1998 In-Fisherman

Professional Walleye Trail Championship at Bismarck, N.D., at the end of a tough three-day tournament on the Missouri River in late September.

Winning the championship has been the high point of my fishing career. It just doesn't get better than this. I began dreaming of this moment when I began fishing professionally 10 years ago, and the reality is even better than the dream.

The thrill of sitting in a boat towed around the indoor arena of the Bismarck Civic Center to the cheers of a crowd of 6,000+ is an experience I will never forget. The fact that my wife, Lori, was sitting with me clutching a bouquet of roses and our daughter, Kristi, was between us waving an American

I don't think those people were



cheering for me as much as they were celebrating the fact that the Bismarck championship signals a

coming of age for walleye tournaments. Walleyes are finally winning the respect they deserve. First prize was \$100,000 in cash and prizes, the largest purse ever awarded at any walleye event.

I am also proud to be the first person from Illinois to win a major PWT event. That fact coupled with fellow Illinois angler, Mike Gofron's, achievement as 1998 PWT Top Gun of the Year (an honor I won in 1995) should underscore the fact that anglers from Illinois can catch walleyes with the best of them.

And, finally, the PWT championship comes to me at the same time that I have a healthy, happy family and while I am enjoying success at Hewlett Packard, where I work as a full-time computer systems salesman. I

log 50,000 to 100,000 miles in the air each year on business in addition to the miles I roll on the

odometer as a traveling fishing pro. I am truly blessed.

That's not bad for a boy from the small town of Chatsworth in Central Illinois who never knew what a walleye looked like until after I graduated from college. Dad had taken me fishing as a kid for bass, panfish and catfish, but never walleye. I was with longtime friend John Campbell on a trip to West and East Lake Okoboji in Iowa when I caught my first one. This was just after graduating from the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1982.

I said, "Hey John, what's this?"

"I'm not sure," John said. "I think it could be a walleye."

We eventually became the 1991 Masters Walleye Circuit Team of the Year. Today, Campbell is an outstanding walleye angler on the PWT. He also was invited to compete at this year's Championship.

Believe me, winning didn't look likely when I arrived in Bismarck the week before the tournament. I was fishing against the 39 top ranked pros at the end of the PWT's five regular season qualifiers. This was one of the toughest Championship fields ever. It included nine of the top 10 PWT money winners, 60 percent of past winners, eight of the past nine Anglers of the Year and two pros who have fished every PWT Championship. The field also included Rick LaCourse, who was amongst the competitors based upon his win at the championship the year earlier. The final competi-

tor was Charlie Christofferson, the PWT's top-ranked amateur.

Add to that the fact that the fishing in the Missouri River was as tough as tough could be. For one thing, tournament boundaries began at Bismarck on the north then stretched southward through 50 miles of the Missouri River made treacherous by shifting sand and low water. The river dropped three feet in one 24-hour period during pre-fishing, rose again and then continued to drop slowly during the tournament.

Another problem, the timing of the event was too early to take advantage of the fall migration of walleyes from Lake Oahe northward into the Missouri River. Many of the fishermen chose to travel the hour or so each way south into Lake Oahe from the launch site to look for fish in the upper end of the main lake itself. Our southern boundary was the border with South Dakota.

A third challenge, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released tremendous amounts of water from the Lake Oahe dam last fall and with it, a large percentage of the smelt disappeared. The smelt should have provided the main food source for game fish in Oahe and the Missouri River. As a result, even more walleyes than normal abandoned the river in search of something to eat after spawning in spring. When we arrived at Bismarck, the walleyes remained stacked in the lower third of Oahe about 200 miles away. Few resident walleyes stayed in the river and the ones that did were small.

Even before launching my Ranger to search for walleyes during practice, I knew the past two PWT Championships at Bismarck were won at bridges over feeder creeks. At the same time, I realized those bridges would probably be popular spots, so to avoid the crowd, I reached for my map and scouted similar looking spots. On the map, I noticed a bridge over the Cannonball Creek several miles south from the launch site. But, when I got to the mouth of Cannonball to check it out, I found the entrance nearly blocked by a mile long stump field and a shallow, sand flat. I spent almost two hours finding a channel deep enough to navigate to get there.

Imagine my disappointment when I finally reached my goal only to discover the Cannonball was murky and void of current, which are hardly characteristics of a good walleye spot. But, I had invested too much time getting there to leave without at least giving it a chance. After catching a few small keeper walleyes near the bridge, I searched further and discovered the pattern that would prove to be decisive. Walleyes, lots of them, were holding in the deeper holes (8 to 10 feet deep) on the river bends. I suspect they were drawn into the creek to feed on young-of-the-year crappie and white bass and sought protection in the holes when water began to drop.

I caught them jigging with Lindy Fuzz-E-Grubs in hot glow yellow and dressed with minnows tied on with 8-pound Stren Magnathin line on Pinnacle spinning rods and reels. I started with one-quarter

ounce jigs, but adjusted to strong winds by going to three-eighths. I think that decision was critical to the victory. The heavier jigs let me maintain crucial contact with the bottom where river walleyes are found. And, bigger fish don't care if a jig weighs slightly more. They are going to gobble it up.

When the tournament began, I caught four walleyes in Cannonball the first day. But, I thought they were too small to win, so I moved to the main river and trolled Shad Rap crankbaits in search of a kicker fish without success. I finished out Day One one fish shy of the five-fish limit. But, based on the low catches I saw overall, it was obvious other anglers were struggling to find large, accessible fish as well. I was still in the thick of things. On Day Two, I returned to cannonball, boated my five walleyes quickly and moved into first place just ahead of my friend, Gofron. On Day Three I caught five walleyes in the Cannonball again. This time they were the heaviest stringer of the event. My final tally was 14 fish totaling 23.92 pounds. Ron Seelhoff, who had success trolling Shad Raps, was second with 21.14 pounds. Next came Mark Martin with 19.78 pounds, who also fished in the Cannonball. Mark Brumbaugh was fourth with 19.43 pounds and Gofron was fifth with 18.97.

Then came that wild, happy ride around the arena with Lori and Kristi.

I'd like to thank my sponsors, MasterLock, Ranger Boats, Mercury Outboards, MinnKota, Bottom Line, Pinnacle, Stren,

Lindy Little Joe, Gamakatsu, Normark, AquaVu and Flambeau. Without them, I could not compete.

I would also like to thank all of you. Without anglers who are interested in walleye fishing, sponsors would not see a reason to promote the sport.

I thank Campbell for being there with me in the early days as we struggled to learn all we could about catching walleyes. My victory is proof that hard work eventually pays off.

I thank my traveling mates and friends, Vaughn Cornelius, Perry Good and Dale Stroschein, who is retiring next year in order to concentrate on his new resort and spend more time with his family.

And most of all, I thank Lori and Kristi. They are my biggest fans.

I've been asked, what's next for me? It would be great to be the first PWT champion to win back to back titles. Or, maybe I could set my sights on becoming PWT angler of the year, which I have never accomplished.

But, in the big picture, I think my goal is just to be the best that I can be.

Best fishes!

This article was reprinted courtesy of Ted Takasaki and Scott Richardson. The article originally appeared on Ted's Web site. You can learn more about walleye fishing and about Ted at his web site located at:
<http://www.ool.com/takasaki/>

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appreciate what we have now in this great fishery resource.

Hopefully, the continuation of modern day fishery management programs and angler awareness will insure for many years healthy walleye populations in the lake and help maintain Lake Erie's reputation as being the true "Walleye Capital of the World."

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Walleye Fishermen

Send us your questions!

In each issue of Lake Erie Walleye, we field questions from walleye anglers to be answered by professional charter boat captains.

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