



# Diversity Training

By Dennis Foster\*

## Varied presentations rule the prairie

**PREDICTIONS OF BLUE-CHIP FISHING WERE realized when the In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail (PWT) rolled into Mobridge, South Dakota, May 28-30 for the Berkley/Lowrance Pro-Am on Lake Oahe. The massive Missouri River impoundment yielded big numbers of fish in a variety of ways, allowing the 104 pros to showcase their talents in multiple manners.**

While the varied presentations and locations were a big part of the story, challenging slot limits and a tough no-cull rule added to the excitement as competitors gambled on which fish to keep.

REVIEWING THE IN-FISHERMAN  
PROFESSIONAL WALLEYE TRAIL  
**BERKLEY/LOWRANCE PRO-AM**

LAKE OAHE,  
MOBRIDGE, SOUTH DAKOTA

MAY 28-30, 2008

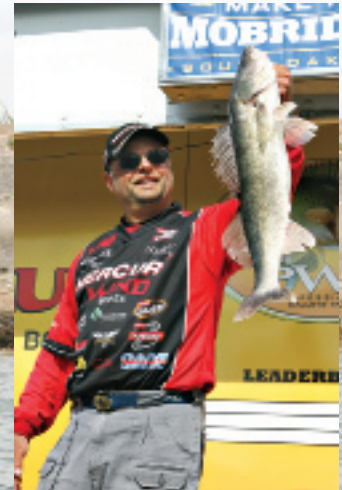
PWT PRO-AM SERIES

Presented by  
Minn Kota



When the dust settled, PWT icon Mark Martin, of Twin Lake, Michigan, claimed top honors, capping a relentless surge that began in fourth place on Day One, rose to second on Day Two, and crested in the winner's circle.

» Jigs, dead rods and the right mix of fish vaulted PWT veteran Mark Martin into first place at Mobridge.



## ON THE REBOUND

Impounding 232 miles of the Missouri from about Riverdale, North Dakota, to Pierre, South Dakota, Oahe is an oasis on the rolling High Plains prairie. Walleye numbers have recovered after a collapse of the lake's rainbow smelt population in the late 1990s stalled growth rates and increased mortality, and the number of large 'eyes is on the upswing.

Also working in the anglers' favor was the tournament's timing. Compared to the PWT's July visit to Oahe in 2006, May offered infinitely more shallow-water options, and pros didn't have to run as far in search of deep fish. Also, thankfully, the prospect of scorching temperatures similar to what the field endured in '06, when the mercury neared 120°F, were slim.

Indeed, contestants arriving for pre-fishing were greeted by unseasonable cold, overcast skies, sustained winds of 25 to 40 mph, and bouts of pelting rain—all of which helped make for a challenging practice period.

Pros found the fish a bit behind schedule, thanks to a cool spring and heavy April snows that delayed the spawn and subsequent postspawn progression. A shift in prey species from smelt to shad—which means many walleyes no longer follow coldwater prey down the reservoir in search of a deeper, cooler environment—was another interesting twist.

Prefishing quickly revealed an abundance of walleyes in the Mobridge area and nearby Grand and Moreau river arms, roughly centered within the tournament boundaries. The fish were almost everywhere: deep, shallow, points, flats, submerged trees—you name it. With so many opportunities close to the launch, time-consuming runs would play a much smaller role than in the past.

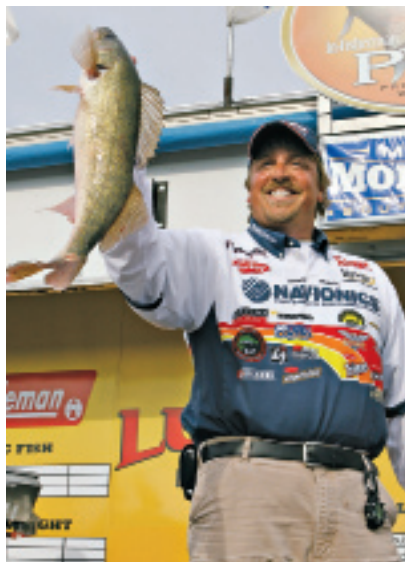
The presentation angle was wide open. Oahe's walleyes are generally receptive to a variety of offerings, particularly early in the year when many of the fish are still relating to shoreline structure. Whatever presentation pros felt was their strong suit would net them plenty of fish. For many, the

overriding factor would be correctly guessing which ones to send over the gunwales.

South Dakota regulations allow just one walleye over 20 inches per angler. That, coupled with a no-cull rule, meant there was no wiggle room concerning the all-important "over" side of the slot.

## PRO PERSPECTIVES

Many anglers, myself included, predicted 18 to 19 pounds or more per day would be needed to win. Figuring that 3 good slots just under 20 inches could



» **Tommy Skarlis wielded a variety of presentations on the downriver sides of creek arms to score a respectable fifth-place finish.**

weigh nearly 9 pounds, and 2 fat overs in the 25-inch class would net another 10, it was a reasonable expectation.

Such catches were relatively easy to accomplish a week prior to the tournament, but fronts blowing through made larger fish hard to come by during competition. Some pros aptly lowered their sights, boxing 22- and 23-inchers. That turned out to be the wise choice, while excessive courage in looking for elusive bigger fish proved disastrous.

Presentations used to garner the top positions were as varied as the

personalities of the pros themselves. Martin relied on strong pitching to seal the victory using jigs tipped with either minnows, creek chubs, or Gulp! Alive! Minnows—depending on the conditions. He also tethered creek chubs behind bottom bouncers on dead rods placed in rod holders.

Martin keenly remembered specific shoreline features from previous tournaments on Oahe, when water levels were lower. Braving miserable conditions in practice, he investigated the spots—now under 10 to 12 feet of water—and found spawning walleyes in an area of rounded boulders somewhat unique to the reservoir in that they were more reminiscent of a glacial lake.

On Day Three alone, Martin estimates he put 100 walleyes in the boat. "It felt like work," he says. "Every time I cast, I had a bite or I was getting the net or (my co-angler) was getting the net or the dead rods were going down. It was insane. They were really in there. If you knew where the shale met the rocks, and if there was gravel in there, that was the key."

Rookie Aaron Deal, who led Days One and Two, pulled crankbaits, mainly 800 Series Reef Runners in blue and purple prism. Contour trolling irregularities in the river channel in search of larger fish (a 30-incher on Day One helped anchor his position in the standings) served him well and landed a very strong second-place showing.

Even though he couldn't close out the victory, a runner-up finish in his first PWT event was more than he expected. "I'm so happy," he grinned after the weigh-in. "Missing the win isn't that big of a deal. I had no fish at noon and I could see myself not cashing a check. That's how bad it was."

Deal originally headed to a spot he'd worked on Days One and Two, where baitfish hung near a pair of sunken trees. When he got there, it had changed drastically—the trees were missing. "One was gone and we watched the other one float away," he said. When trolling the now-treeless spot proved futile, he moved to the next

point and popped a 20½-inch walleye. Concerned that he needed bigger fish to fend off Martin, he changed to live-bait rigs; when that approach failed, a final switch to trolling cranks over 32 feet of water produced a pair of 21s, two 18s, and a 16.

In third place, South Dakota native and Oahe expert Rick Olson put together a crank-laden program during prefishing, but by opening morning decided on a different tack. Worried the weather had unsettled the fish he found in practice, Olson switched to “slow death” livebait rigs in 9 to 12 feet at 1 to 1.1 mph with self-bent Gamakatsu hooks. Dead rods sporting propeller rigs completed the package.

Local Brent Beitelspacher relied on leadcore setups along with FireLine coupled with 4 ounces of lead and a smorgasbord of lures to target 30-foot depths. Beitelspacher was also flexible enough to find some of his overs in the afternoon in shallower areas around 6 to 15 feet.

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No stranger to skirmishing in the thick of things, Tommy Skarlis landed in fifth place using a variety of livebait and Gulp! Alive! offerings and techniques. He hit numerous spots, some repeatedly, to bring in the right combination of fish. Skarlis had 15 viable spots going into the event, but as they began to receive more fishing pressure, he relied on Navionics mapping

to help him quickly locate similar areas—namely the downriver sides of creek arms—and stay on active fish.

The diversity of what the top five were doing is a testament to the varied nature of tactics used across the field of contestants. As long as you kept a bait of some sort in the water, it was nearly impossible to not bring in a 5-fish basket.

When all was said and done, Oahe not only lived up to expectations but once again firmly established itself as one of the premier walleye destinations on the continent. ■

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