

# ➤ GAME PLAN

Mack's Lure  
Hot Wings



## Second Half Walleye

# Tactics

BY DENNIS FOSTER\*

**W**hat I relate here has been extracted from years of experience on expansive reservoirs such as those on the Missouri River—most notably Oahe—but applies on any large waterway with long stretches of relatively shallow structure, breaking sharply into deep water. I focus on the second half of the open-water season in most of the walleye belt, once hot weather sets in for good, up until the leaves start to turn.

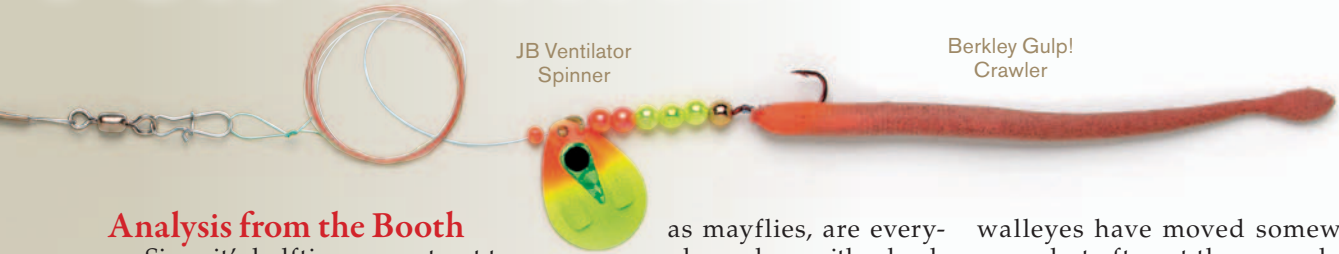
Ever notice that although you've had consistent success on a body of water from ice-out through the Post-spawn Period and early summer, success steadily dissipates thereafter? Boat-ramp banter may go something like this, "It's spotty at best with mostly smaller fish; the dog days are here and the big ones quit biting." Nothing could be further from the truth. Walleyes may actually be biting better, but you haven't adjusted to not only what they want, but where they are.

At this time of year, walleyes have many choices

of prey and many locations to feed. Compare this scenario to a football team. In the second half, walleyes are quickly gaining the upper hand. We need to analyze and revise our game plan. But the fish have the home-field advantage.

Time to try a few gadget plays. If you think I'm going a bit overboard with the metaphor, you need to take it personally. Don't let an opponent with a brain the size of a pea outmaneuver you. Don't be passive mamby pamby; smack 'em right in the mouth—with your hooks, that is.

# FOR SUMMER SCORES



## Analysis from the Booth

Since it's halftime, we retreat to the locker room (okay a bar room or other getaway works). Let's dissect reasons why what's been working so well early in the game is failing us. Early season walleyes are generally cooperative and fairly predictable. They tend to group tightly, looking to feed after a long winter and spawning's physical toll. Edible-size baitfish are the least abundant of the year.

These factors contribute to aggressive feeding that tends to be non-selective. Fish are hungry and ready to strike anything that looks like calories. Numbers of aggressive fish tightly grouped on shallow structure and responding to time-tested live-bait techniques is a wonderful recipe for success, as long as it lasts.

So why does this pattern fade out once summer rolls around? One key factor is that nature has tipped the scales on the earlier scarcity of food. Edibles are now abundant. Swarms of newly hatched minnows and panfish, along with invertebrates such

as mayflies, are everywhere, along with schooling preyfish—smelt, shad, herring, perch, or alewives. Life is easy and walleyes can now afford to be selective and scatter over increasingly wide areas.

This can be daunting when we try to figure out where to present baits to interest them among a plethora of choices. But don't be intimidated by this prevent defense the fish seem to have established. They're no longer blitzing baitfish, so we go to our spread offense with some new wrinkles. Pick off the most aggressive walleyes one by one while straining as much water as possible, using baits that stand out in this crowded arena.

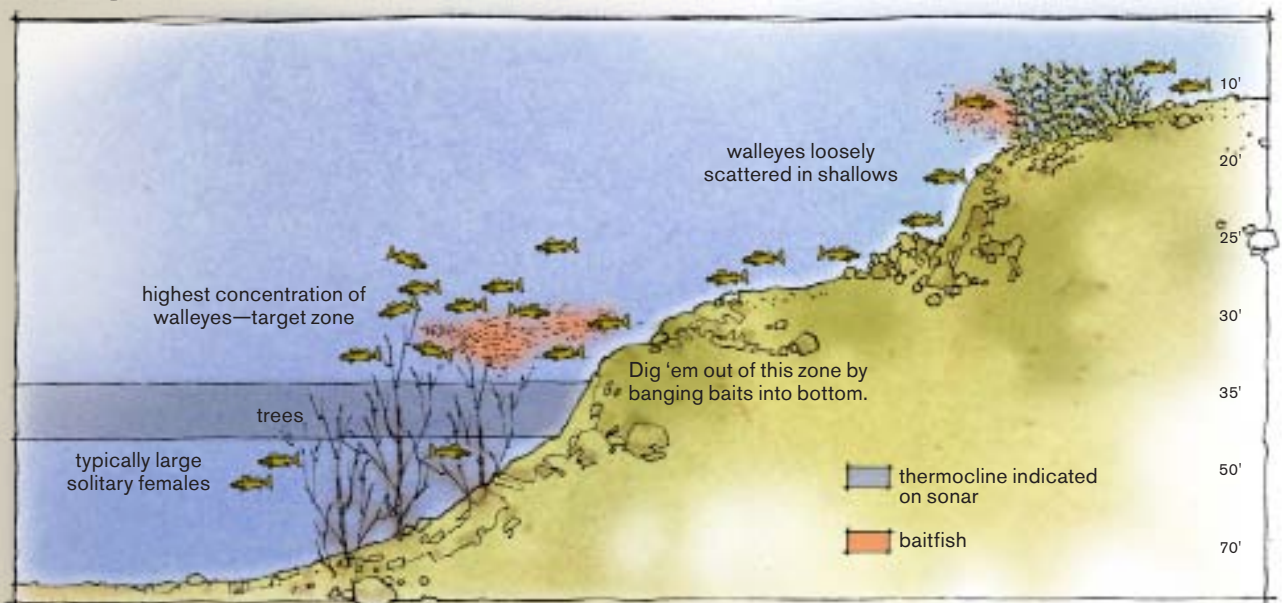
## Locational Approaches

Now where do we run our new plays? Walleyes still hold a home-field advantage, so it's important to narrow the playing field. In many situations, you needn't look much farther than the length of a long pass from where you were previously catching them. Instead of relating to shoreline structure,

walleyes have moved somewhat away, but often at the same depth they'd occupied earlier. Their position near free-roaming baitfish, yet still close enough to take advantage of shallow feeding opportunities, which in summer are typically wind-driven and short-lived.

You need a good scouting report to quickly define likely areas. Begin by running a zigzag pattern from the tips of points and straight shorelines from about 15 feet of water out to the deepest water available and back again. Look for signs of bait and walleyes. This searching pattern can vary somewhat with the body of water. With today's electronics, I confidently do this on plane, at speeds of 20 mph or more. I run Raymarine's C140 Widescreen units that have a separate digital sounder module, which can interpret and display information with no clutter. The detail is great and you can even pick out walleyes within balls of baitfish and mark thermoclines. I've found that most mature walleyes hold at the level of this temperature break. They may be at areas where deep denser water

## Target Zone



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contacts shoreline features, or suspended over much deeper water adjacent to it.

When defining optimal target depth, mark waypoints each time you encounter it. If 30 feet is key, set a waypoint every time the boat passes over this depth. Now, by connecting the dots, you have a good starting point as you begin your first trolling pass. Continue this process and after a few passes, key contours are outlined exactly. Drop a fish icon as soon as a rod gets hit and you've refined it further by identifying higher percentage spots along your trolling route.

Always move with the wind where possible and use these extended passes (from a mile to several) to keep baits in the water as much as possible. Once you complete a long run, swing out over the basin and sprint back to a point just beyond the beginning of your track. Have all rods down and set before you enter the productive zone.

Now that we've completed our analysis and have an idea where to run plays, it's time to spread the field and use this information to target as many fish as possible. With a little imaginative play calling, we can cover a wide swath of water both horizontally and vertically, saturating the field.

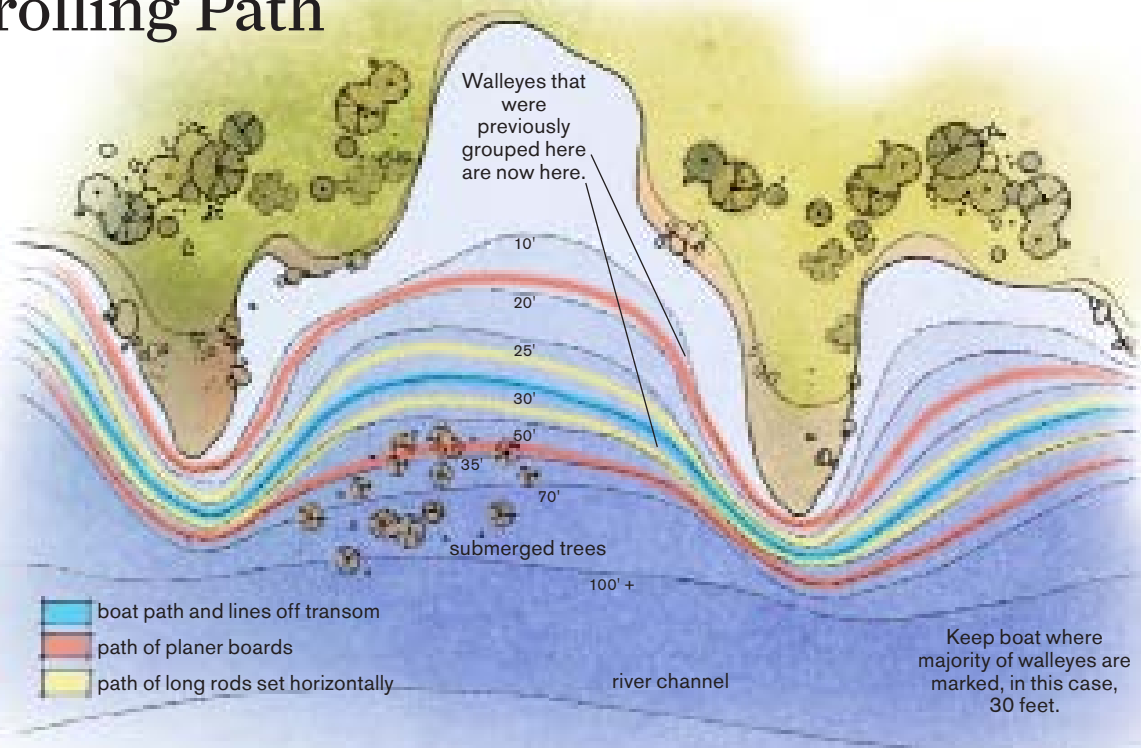
## The Game Plan

My approach is to start an extended trolling pass and not turn back even when fish are caught. Your weapons are planer boards, mixed with strategically placed flatlines. The idea is to cover our defined sweet spot with lures run right up the gut. Use long rods as quick outs, and let the boards work the sidelines. We want to exploit these fish in every zone, as at this stage of the game there can be fish feeding in various areas at the same time. I have a method that allows you to do this while contour-trolling the trickiest breaks easily, with up to six rods.

Using the 30-foot guideline mentioned earlier, planer boards are the first out of the huddle, to provide maximum spread and easy deployment. I typically start trolling with a large, attention-grabbing crankbait, such as an 800-series Reef Runner, out in the abyss. A 150-foot length of 10/4 FireLine gets you to the 30-foot range and runs trouble free all day. Call this is your post route. With this one, you only need to connect a couple times a game for a touchdown (lunker fish of the day).

Use the second board to explore the shallows, up on top of the points and tapering flats you encounter. This play rapidly picks off aggressive walleyes that slide up to shallower structure to feed. We want our march down the field to be free of drive-killing penalties (time lost to fouled lures), so run baits high enough so as not to drag bottom and be flagged. There's no need to be close to the bottom as these fish are motivated and come up and smack baits above them.

## > Trolling Path



Shad-style baits running from 5 to 15 feet down work fine—200 and 400 Series Reef Runner Ripshads and #5 and #7 Rapala Shad Raps fill the lineup perfectly. An option play is to run a 1/4-ounce keel weight and a #4 JB Lures Ventilator Spinner baited with Gulp! Nightcrawlers. This is a tough panfish-resistant setup that allows you to use contrasting color combinations of Gulp! and spinner blades. With the clicker on, keep your drag just tight enough to hold the board in place to prevent tear offs. Walleyes generally hammer the shallow stuff.

Other rods are placed in holders strategically set around the boat to provide maximum spread and to prevent tangles. Set properly, a snag- and tangle-free day is ensured with up to 6 lines. The next pair are flatlines set on 10- to 12-foot rods pointed out horizontally. Some anglers have sought to press a size advantage, using rods up to 15 feet, but I find that 12 is about all I can manage before the law of diminishing returns applies. Any player that proves argumentative exits the lineup quickly.

In this scenario, you want the inside rods running a bit shallower than your outside ones to account

for the 30 feet or so between them. Deploy different amounts of setback to prevent tangles on sharp turns. Set, say another big Reef Runner 100 feet back on the outside and a Deep Little Ripper 150 feet back on the inside.

We can now focus on our pivot-point rods—8-footers with soft tips and decent backbone, pointed at a 45-degree angle off the transom. We want these lines to precisely follow all contours you put the boat over, no matter how sharp, without tangling. We're trying to take out fish, not pick off our own players. Snapweights in the 4- to 6-ounce range are ideal. With a little line out, they trail behind the boat and stay where we want them. Run one or two lines this way. I prefer to start out with one snapweight and a rod rigged with leadcore.

These systems allow accurate presentation of any size lure—even tiny cranks or light spoons. High-action, bite-size baits such as #4 and #5 Jointed Shad Raps, 200 Ripshads, and Salmo Hornets and Bullheads of similar size work great. If walleyes show a preference for one form of lead or the other, sit one on the bench and go with a two-tight-end set.

Another sometimes productive option is to run spinners and live

crawlers on either the snapweights or leadcore. Ventilator blades (#4 or #5) work well, maximizing thump and flash. The vents in the blades add turbulence and attraction, but more importantly, allow rigs to run true at a fast clip.

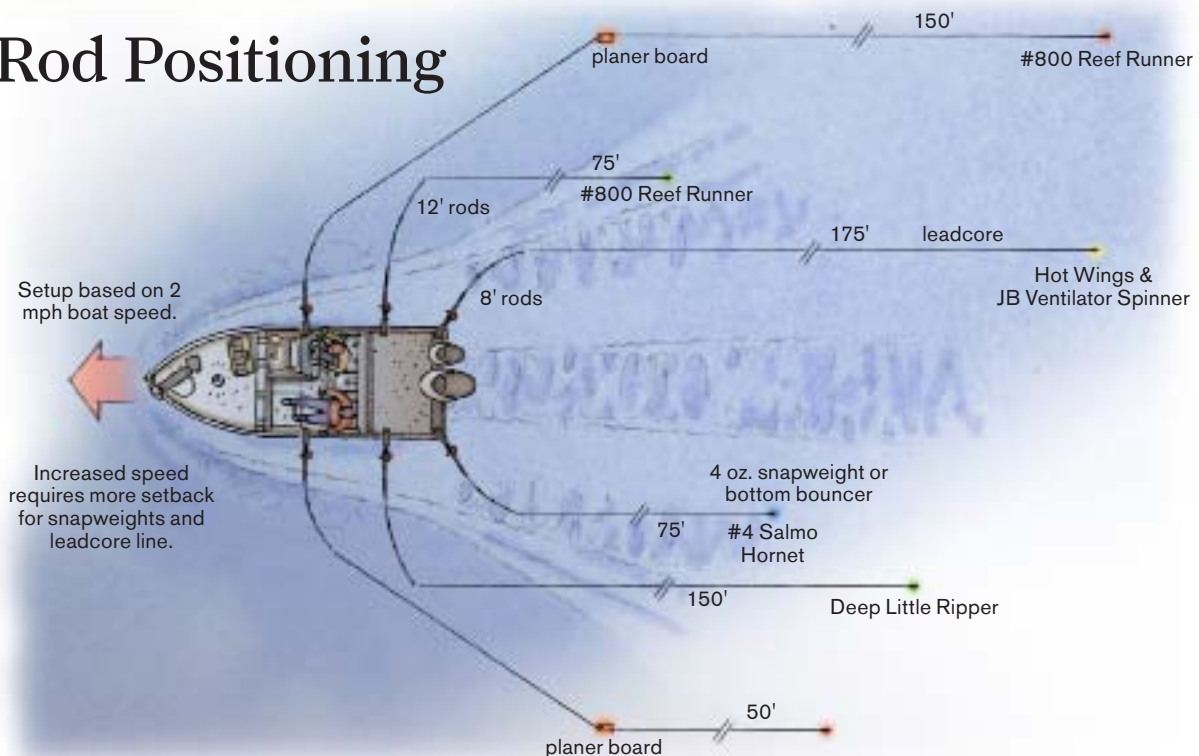
Another alternative that's deadly at times is to run a 4-ounce bottom bouncer tight to the bottom with a 3-foot leader of 10- or 12-pound mono and a Storm Hot 'N Tot. Its wide-ranging darting action draws vicious strikes from even lethargic fish. Its short leash keeps this unpredictable lure under control, not fouling nearby lines. Four-ounce bouncers can be hard to find, but placing two 1-ounce Rubbercor sinkers on the shaft of a 2-ouncer builds your own. Looks goofy, but works well.

## Coaching Tips: Getting the Most from Your Players

Trolling speed is critical. Standard fair is in the 2-mph range, but I recommend continuously experimenting over the course of a day to stay dialed in. If bites drop off, alter throttle setting before lures. Many times this gets you back in the game.

When using snapweights, long leaders aren't necessary. Forget

## › Rod Positioning



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Monday morning quarterbacking on the 50/50 stuff. A good rule is to use a leader as long as the rod you're using. This eliminates the need to unsnap weights when landing fish. With spinner rigs, it pays to run a flashy attractor such as a Mack's Lure Hot Wings in front, like a fullback leading your tailback through the hole. Added flair and a stutterstep such as this nets you big gains.

Ultimate Smart Links Lure Savers are a nifty niche player that I find invaluable when fishing over and through the tops of submerged trees in reservoirs or places like Devils Lake. They're an ingenious titanium split ring replacement that opens up when snagged, leaving the offending hook behind and allowing you to retrieve your plug. Snap on a new treble and you're back in business while the other rods continue trolling along. The 10-pound model matches 10/4 FireLine.

You won't be penalized for motion in the backfield. It's always a good idea to continually manipulate the rods in holders to momentarily vary the speed and action of lures. Slow and steady doesn't always win the race. It's amazing how often you lift a rod from the holder to check for debris, and it gets slammed as you set it back down.

Look to your crankbait box for underutilized players. You want to stand out; matching the hatch can be detrimental. Walleyes are conditioned to seeing hordes of natural-looking baitfish. Give 'em something unusual in color or action. Dark-colored plugs are an overlooked option play. Purples, blacks, and even browns have earned a starting position in my boat the last few years. Midnight Flash and Purple Bare Naked from Reef Runner and the Viking and Hot Bullhead colors from Salmo are great examples.

You also need a competent quarterback to steer the boat. I've found it best to dedicate one person solely for this job. He can concentrate on precisely navigating the predetermined course while the other

## ➤ Crank Selection



Yo-Zuri  
Hardcore



Salmo  
Hornet



Lindy  
Shadling



LiveTarget  
Gizzard Shad



Rapala  
Jointed Shad  
Rap



Berkley  
Flicker Shad



Rapala  
Shad Rap



Reef  
Runner  
Ripshad



Storm  
Hot 'N Tot



Reef Runner  
#800

anglers set lines and net fish. The highly visible 14-inch screen on my C140 facilitates this job as one side is split for sonar while the other displays a Navionics background map for reference to breaklines as well as waypoints and icons. Sonar combined with mapping helps keep the boat where you want it and allow slight course corrections.

I've found that during an extremely tough bite, you can literally dig a few fish off points and structure projections. For example, when moving toward rising structure, slide a bit shallower and let the lines set directly behind the boat begin to bang bottom and careen off hard substrate as you come up the break. Leadcore and snapweight options are speed dependant—speed up and they blow right over the top of the highest point. The

commotion created and subsequent increase in speed as lures bump and run free can draw violent strikes, even when the bite has been tough.

Consider what I've passed along as a pep talk or better yet a Lombardi or Ditka type kick in the pants to quit whining and get back in the game, but with a much more aggressive attitude and some new tactics. The walleyes are waiting, taunting you with those glassy eyes and toothy grins. Don't take that from those white-tailed wussies. You're bigger, faster, and now hopefully smarter than them guys. Go kick some serious walleye fin. ■

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