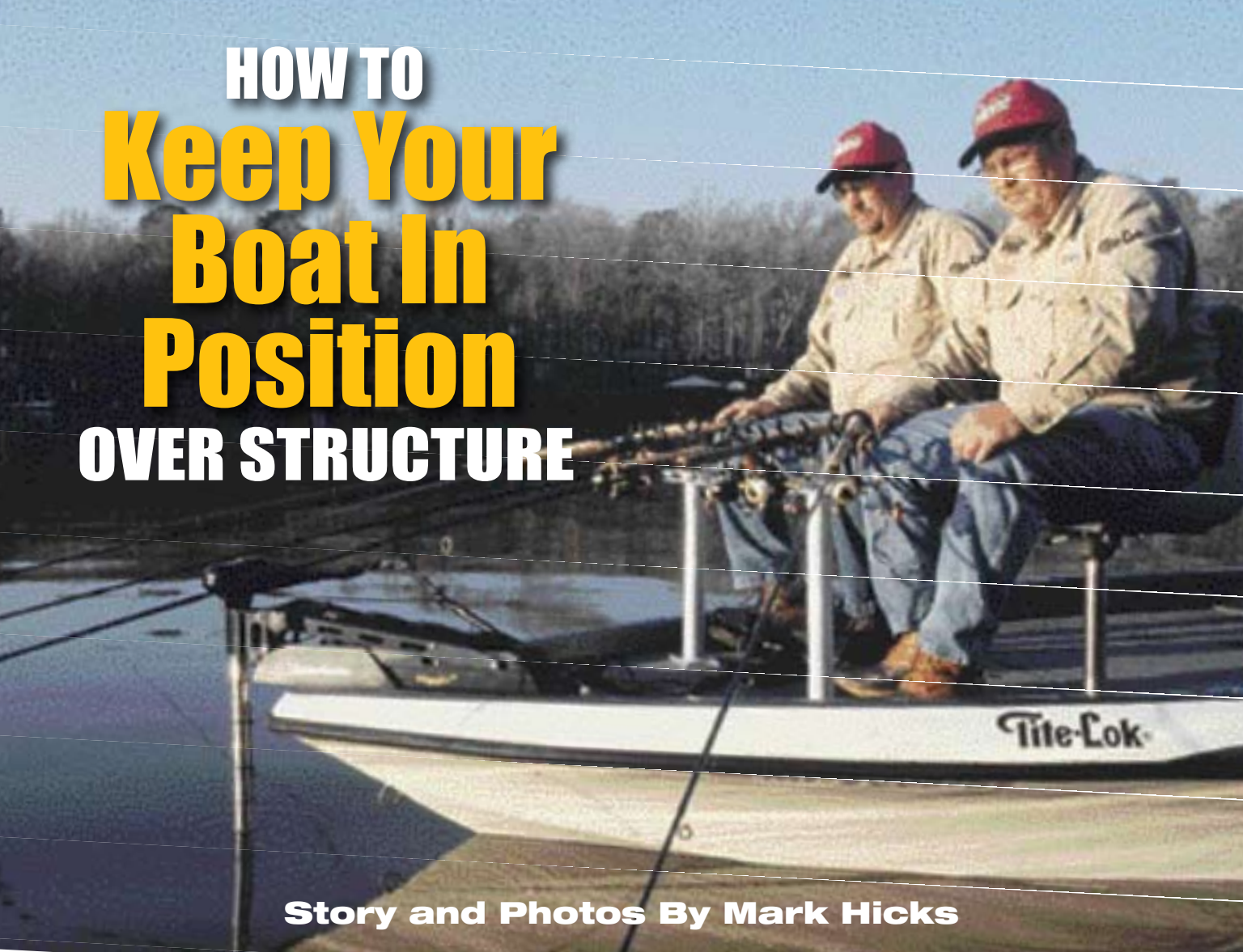


HOW TO Keep Your Boat In Position OVER STRUCTURE



Story and Photos By Mark Hicks

You'll never reach your full potential as a crappie angler until you master boat control. The finest tackle and the best baits are worthless if your boat strays from the cover or structure that holds the fish. You must stay within range of the crappie and keep your boat exactly where it needs to be so your baits can tempt bites. Sometimes the difference between a drab day and a boatload of fish is a matter of inches.

The electric motor is the beating heart of boat control. Many crappie fishermen opt for a bow-mount motor with a cable-steer foot-control system. This is a good setup for anglers who fish close to cover with casting and dipping techniques and for those who troll forward with spider rigs that extend from the boat's bow.

Dale Kirby spends most of his free

time plucking crappie from visible cover along the banks of Herrington Lake and other reservoirs near his Lancaster, Ky., home. A Minn Kota foot-control motor sits on the nose of his 19-foot Crappie King fiberglass boat, which has a low freeboard like a bass boat.

"I like a heavy fiberglass boat that sits low in the water," Kirby says. "The wind can't push it around the way it does an aluminum boat, and that lets me sit close to cover without bumping into it."

The front fishing deck of Kirby's Crappie King is down in the boat. He prefers this to a high fishing deck because he doesn't have to stoop to pick up rods that are resting against the gunwale. Since Kirby doesn't fasten the foot-control pedal to the floor, the low deck prevents it from bouncing out of the boat. He moves the pedal to which-

ever side of the boat he is fishing from for maximum comfort and control.

Electronics

The low deck also makes it easier for Kirby to read and operate his Humminbird liquid-crystal graph (LCG), which is mounted an arm's length away behind the electric motor bracket. It complements the Humminbird LCG on his console. This lets him read a depthfinder while fishing from the bow or driving the boat, which is critical for optimum boat control.

Depthfinders on the bow and console helped Dickey Barry and Brian Barnes of Corinth, Miss., win the amateur title at the 2002 Crappie USA Classic. Because their main technique is spider-rigging, they prefer a bass boat with a high front casting deck that has room enough for two fishing seats and

rod holders placed side by side. This is how Barry's current Ranger Z20 Comanche is set up.

Since winning the championship, Barry has added a hand-held Garmin GPSMAP 76 to his fishing electronics. He can use the hand-held GPS while driving from the console, spider-rigging from the bow and when fishing in a boat other than his Ranger.

"With that little Garmin GPS, I rarely have to throw a marker buoy out," Barry says. "A buoy draws a crowd, and I really don't want to invite people to catch my fish. When I mark a spot with the GPS, I can get back to within 5 to 15 feet of

it. When I'm spider-rigging, my eyes go from my depthfinder to my rod tips to my GPS all day long."

Speed & Thrust

Barry's bow-mount Minn Kota Maxxum 74 electric motor features 74 pounds of thrust and a variable speed that may be set anywhere from zero to maximum speed. He claims the variable speed feature is indispensable because moving at the right pace is critical when spider-rigging.

"A motor with, say, five settings doesn't let you adjust to the exact speed you need when spider-rigging or long-

lining," Barry says.

The 74 pounds of thrust generated by Barry's electric motor is adequate in most situations. However, there have been times when he wished for Minn Kota's Maxxum 101, which has 101 pounds of thrust. One of those times was during the fall 2004 Crappie USA Classic on South Carolina's Santee Cooper. The tournament took place between hurricanes, and the wind was so strong that Barry's electric motor couldn't overcome it when he tried spider-rigging.

He and his partner had to leave their best spots and fish an offshore creek channel juncture on the side of the lake that was sheltered by the wind. They finished in sixth place, but they wonder what could have been if they'd had a stronger electric motor. The moral here is to rig your boat with an electric motor that has enough power to overcome the most extreme conditions.

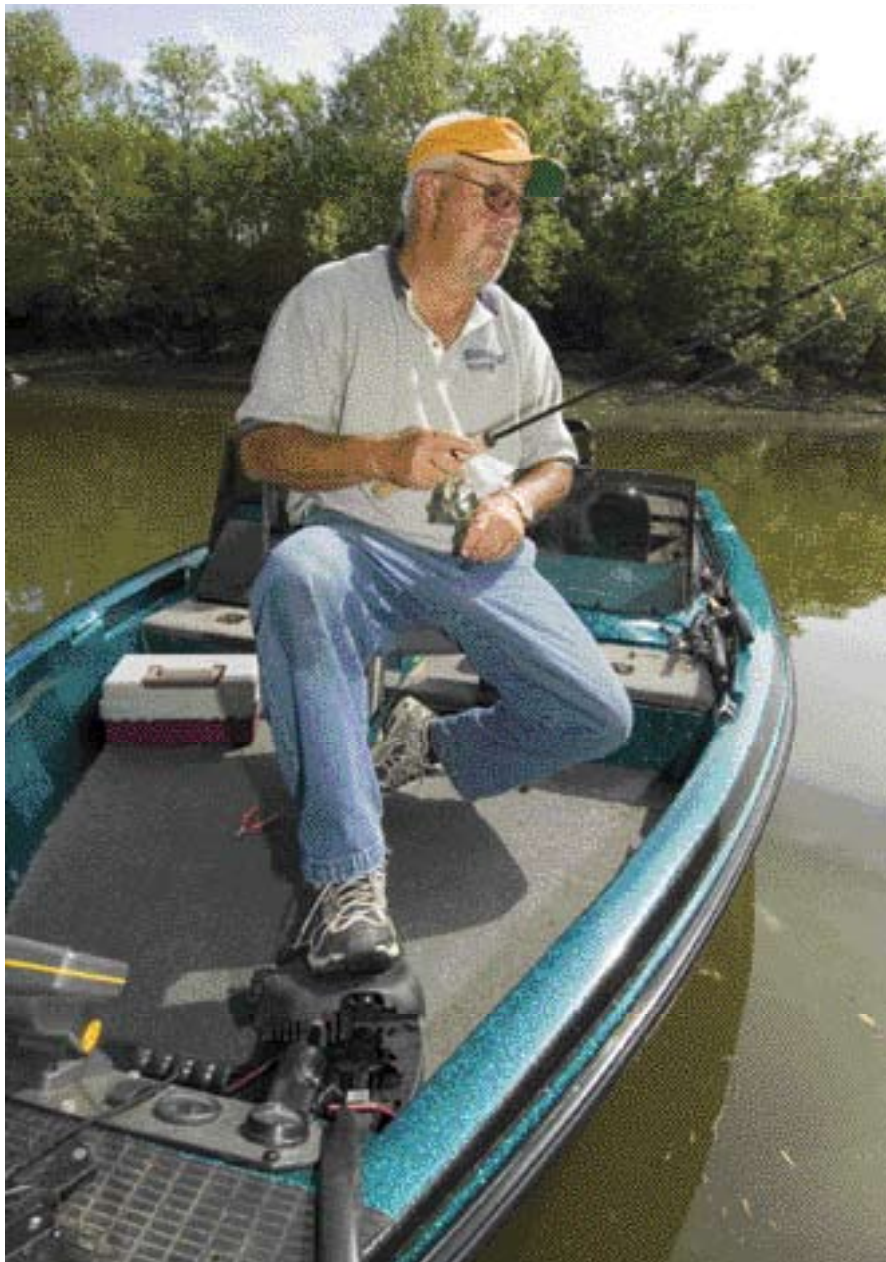
Hand-Control Motor

Noted crappie expert Steve McCadams rigs his 21-foot Triton TR21 bass boat with a variable-speed, bow-mounted MotorGuide hand-control electric motor. He has a touch foot switch installed on both sides of his front deck. This lets him face either side of the boat and start and stop the motor with his foot. He steers the motor with his hand.

"I need a big boat because I often carry three clients," McCadams says. "A hand-control motor lets me comfortably fish off either side of the boat and watch what my customers are doing. With a foot-control motor, I'd have my back to my clients all day."

A hand-held motor also lets McCadams keep an eye on all the rods when he trolls long lines, and it works well for trolling forward with spider rigs. Another advantage is that there is no steering cable to break, which could sabotage a fishing trip.

Hand-control motors are also popular with anglers who clamp them to gunwales of aluminum boats so they can troll sideways. This lets them spread their rods from the bow to the transom for a wide trolling pass. The motor is usually placed on the side of the boat opposite the rods. The motor pulls the boat along or slows



For maximum control and comfort, veteran crappie fisherman Dale Kirby uses a Minn Kota foot-control motor to steer his 19-foot Crappie King fiberglass boat.

the speed of a drifting boat. **Electric Steer & Autopilot**

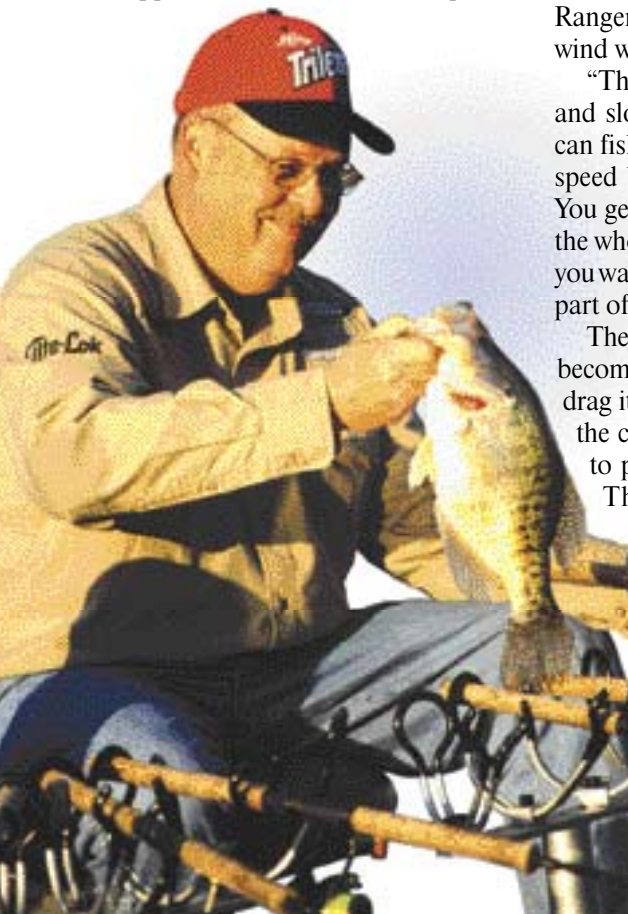
If you do much long-lining, consider an electric-steer motor with an autopilot, such as the Minn Kota 74 Powerdrive with autopilot on Sam Heaton's boat. Heaton, a crappie authority from Florida, lines up a creek channel ledge or some other drop-off, then sets the electric motor to run a course along the edge of the drop at whatever speed he wishes.

As the motor keeps him on course, Heaton is free to move anywhere about the boat to tend lines and land crappie. If he needs to change the course or the speed, he makes the adjustments from anywhere in the boat with a hand-held, wireless Co-Pilot.

"An autopilot motor with a Co-Pilot is the only way to go," Heaton says. "I can manage 10 rods by myself with that system."

Chains & Socks

When the wind blows so hard that Missouri's Jim Reedy can't buck it with an electric motor, he drifts with the wind and slows his speed with a chain or a drift sock. Reedy is a longtime Crappie USA tournament competitor



3 Keys For Using Trolling Motor Batteries

- To ensure peak trolling motor performance throughout a long fishing day, use only deep-cycle batteries. They are designed to be repeatedly discharged as much as 80 percent and then recharged. Never power an electric motor with a cranking battery.
- Buy the largest deep-cycle batteries with the highest cranking amps that will fit in your boat's battery compartment. You'll pay less for lower cranking amps, but it's false economy that could leave your trolling motor dead on the water. Sealed AGM batteries cost more than flooded cell (wet) batteries, but they can't spill and need less maintenance.
- Always charge your batteries promptly after each day of fishing with a capable charger. You can't beat waterproof on-board chargers for convenience, such as those made by Minn Kota. They deliver a fast three-stage charge, which extends battery life. — *Mark Hicks*

who fishes with his wife, Barbara. The couple often finishes in the top four in the point standings.

Reedy learned about dragging a chain while fishing Tennessee's Reelfoot Lake, which is a maze of flooded stumps. Fishing guides at Reelfoot drag chains to slow their drifting speed, because drift socks hang on the stumps.

Reedy's dragging chain consists of 15 feet of 3/8-inch chain tied to 30 feet of 3/8-inch rope. He ties the rope to a cleat on the gunwale near the transom and loops it around the outboard. This lets the chain drag from the center of the transom, which makes his 20-foot Ranger 690 boat point straight downwind while it drifts.

"The chain drags across the bottom and slows you down enough that you can fish," Reedy says. "You control the speed by how much rope you let out. You get the most breaking power when the whole chain drags on the bottom. If you want to drift faster, take in rope to lift part of the chain off the bottom."


The drawback with a chain is that it becomes covered with mud when you drag it over soft bottoms. Reedy stores the chain in a 5-gallon plastic bucket to prevent it from fouling his boat.

Though he claims that a chain affords better control than a

drift sock, Reedy will use a drift sock when drifting over a clean bottom.

A drift sock came through for him in January when he and his wife fished a Crappie USA tournament on Florida's Harris Chain of lakes. They had found a school of crappie suspended about 8 feet deep over 16 to 17 feet of water. The crappie were staging prior to moving into shallow spawning areas.

Blustery 15 to 25 mph winds prevented the Reedys from holding over the fish. They resorted to drifting and dragging jigs tipped with minnows, and slowed their speed with a big drift sock that was rated for a 30-foot boat.

"We'd drift over the school of crappie, catch a few and pull in the drift sock," Reedy says. "Then we'd fire up the outboard, run upwind of the fish and make another drift. We finished in second place. We would not have done nearly as well without that drift sock." 

MANUFACTURERS MENTIONED

Bassmaster Boats (Crappie King)
(859) 792-1413

Garmin
1-800-800-1020
www.garmin.com

Humminbird
(334) 687-6613
www.humminbird.com

Minn Kota
1-800-661-9086
www.minnkotamotors.com

MotorGuide
(920) 929-5040
www.motorguide.com

Ranger
1-800-373-2628
www.rangerboats.com

Triton
1-888-887-4866
www.tritonboats.com

Crappie USA Classic champion Dickey Barry credits boat control for much of his fishing success. He prefers a foot-controlled, cable-steered electric motor to stay on quality fish when spider-rigging.