

Power-Trolling With Heavy Sinkers

Hot, New Tournament Technique

Story and Photos By Don Wirth

When compared to bass and walleye fishermen, crappie anglers utilize a rather limited array of presentations. Most weekend crappie hunters tight-line minnows, jig tubes around brushy cover or bang bottom with a Kentucky rig. But with the explosion of big-money crappie tournaments, new presentation methods are making the scene that are bound to revolutionize the way you fish.

One of these tournament tactics is power-trolling with heavy sinkers. It's a method that's totally different from the tried-and-true presentations you've been using, but it's so effective that it's currently the hottest technique in nationwide crappie competitions.

Tournament Tactics

Larry McMullin is one of the nation's leading crappie tournament pros. The Missouri angler has competed in crappie tournaments since 1986 and has qualified for the Crappie USA Classic in 1991, 1997 and every year since. He won the 1999 Classic on Alabama's Neely Henry Lake and finished second in the 2000 Classic at Mississippi's Grenada Lake. Simply put, this guy is good. He's won thousands of dollars in cash, two fully rigged crappie boats and a warehouse full of merchandise. And most of his tournament fish have been caught by power-trolling with heavy sinkers.

"I didn't invent this technique," McMullin says. "I picked it up a long time ago from other tournament anglers and have spent years refining it. I've never seen a crappie system anywhere near as deadly as this one. It's ideal for tournament competition because it will put more fish in the boat faster than any other method going. That's a huge plus when you're fishing against the



clock. Yet once you get the hang of it, it's surprisingly easy and a great way for the weekend crappie fisherman to catch more quality fish."

This unorthodox tactic involves trolling a variety of lures such as jigs, crankbaits and small spinners on extra-long rods. Unlike most trolling techniques, the lures are not run a long distance behind the boat, but rather almost straight down beneath the boat on short leaders attached to the main line. A heavy sinker (from 5 ounces up to 12 ounces depending on depth, wind velocity and other factors) is employed to keep the presentation totally vertical.

McMullin says extra-long rods are necessary to keep the lures far enough away from the boat to avoid tangles and spooking fish, and to provide sufficient shock absorption for the heavy sinkers. He uses 17-foot extendible Sportsman 200 Series crappie poles from The Crappie Company and cuts a foot off the tip section of each pole to stiffen them up sufficiently to handle those substantial weights. The poles are equipped with bargain-basement baitcasting reels that are spooled with 12-pound gold Stren monofilament line.

"This line is easy for the angler to see when trolling and doesn't seem to impact the crappie bite one way or another," McMullin says.

McMullin's preferred power-troll-



Tournament pro Larry McMullin prefers big sinkers for power-trolling, using 5 ounces of lead when trolling jigs and up to 12 ounces with crankbaits.

ing lure is a 1/6- to 1/4-ounce jig with either a tube or twister body. He usually fishes five jigs on each rod.

"This sounds like a big tangle waiting to happen, but if you space the jigs out right, it's surprisingly tangle-free," he promises.

The jigs are attached to the main line with a series of 3- to 4-inch leader lines. The same line you use for the main line will work here as well.

"Tie a jig to one end of the leader, then knot the leader around the main line like you're tying a shoelace," McMullin explains. "Next, half-hitch the leader line below the jig and pull

tight. Then pass the leader over the top of the jig, make another half-hitch and the leader is locked in place. With jigs, I run a 5-ounce sinker on the bottom. I tie the bottom leader about a foot above the sinker and space the remaining four leaders up the line a foot apart. I like to troll a wide variety of jig colors. That's a great side benefit of having so many jigs in the water at the same time."

McMullin fishes from a Ranger 690 VS tournament boat that's powered by a fuel-injected Evinrude 175-hp outboard equipped with a trolling plate that can be lowered behind the prop to slow his speed to a crawl. McMullin says the ideal trolling speed is less than 1 mph. A GPS unit keeps track of his speed and location. At the bow are eight rod holders that McMullin fabricated himself. These swivel to allow perfect rod placement and are numbered 1 through 8.

"I really like the numbering system on the holders because I can be seated at the cockpit running the engine and watching my graph, spot a hit on one of the rods and call out the number of the rod to my tournament partner so he can grab it and swing the fish aboard," McMullin says.

He typically runs eight poles off the bow at the same time, cutting a swath between 30 and 40 feet wide as he trolls.

"This isn't a finesse rig," he notes.

6 Tips For Power-Trolling

- Pre-rig your leaders and lures before you hit the water. Tournament pro Larry McMullin keeps his leaders wrapped around a strip of cardboard.
- Keep a close eye on your graph. Try to position each line so the bottom jig or crankbait is running through a school of crappie or baitfish.
- Start by trolling one or two rods, then gradually work your way up to more rods as you become accustomed to this style of fishing.
- If your home lake has standing timber, position the weight so it runs above the level of the trees to avoid hang ups.
- If you troll past a spot that appears to be holding crappie, drop a marker buoy on it, then make multiple passes across it. The heavy weights keep your presentation vertical and facilitate sharp turns and precise lure placement.
- Vary your jig or crankbait color according to the sky and water conditions. On sunny days, reflective chrome or gold crankbaits will outfish flat colors, but the reverse is usually true on cloudy days. Likewise, bright jig colors work best in murky water, but natural colors score more fish in clear waters.

— Don Wirth

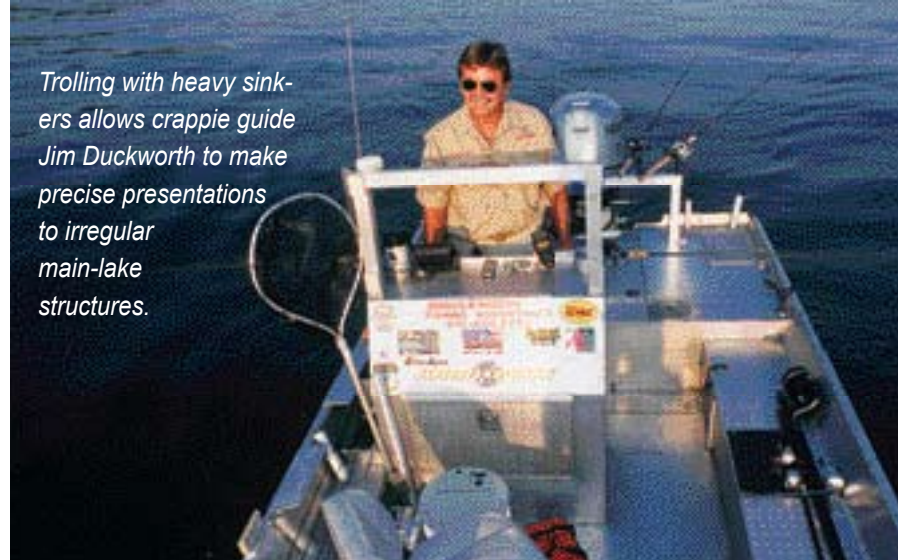
“It’s an aggressive approach designed to slice through big schools of crappie and mop up huge numbers of fish. When you cut through a big school, you may have two or more crappie on every rod at the same time.”

McMullin staggers the depth of his presentation according to the depth of the structure he’s fishing and the location of baitfish and crappie on his graph.

“On the first rod, I’ll drop the sinker all the way down and reel it up until it doesn’t drag bottom,” he explains. “Then on the next rod, I’ll do the same thing and raise the sinker back up to about the depth of the lowest leader line on the first rod. With eight poles out, I want to cover around 20 feet of the water column. This will present lures to fish holding near the bottom or suspending up higher.”

At the Crappie USA Classic at Grenada Lake, McMullin was running his deepest jig at almost 30 feet and his shallowest at nearly 3 feet.

“This was because the crappie weren’t tightly bunched up at a specific depth but were fanned out loosely across big main-lake structures,” he recalls. “Normally, most of my bites



Trolling with heavy sinkers allows crappie guide Jim Duckworth to make precise presentations to irregular main-lake structures.

will occur in a narrower depth range. I’ll typically start catching most of my fish on one or two rods, note the depth at which those jigs are running, then adjust the depth of my other presentations accordingly.”

McMullin targets large structures, including main-lake flats with stumps or brushy cover, channel drops, ledges and humps, trolling either straight or in a lazy-S pattern. Wind can be a major asset.

“This method definitely works best when the wind is blowing,” McMullin says. “The rougher, the better. It’s virtually the only presentation you can make accurately with a 2- to 3-foot chop on the water. On those rough, windy days, it will outfish tournament competitors using other methods 10-to-1.”

Besides jigs, the Missouri pro will power-troll two 300 Series Bandit crankbaits or two in-line spinners like the Mepps Comet Minnow per rod, both on 3-foot leaders. He also makes his own in-lines from plastic snap beads purchased at craft stores.

A Guide’s Method

Tennessee crappie guide Jim Duckworth is one of the nation’s most versatile anglers and was quick to adapt the power-trolling tournament method to his own style of fishing.

“I find this system works best

when the water temperature is above 60 degrees,” Duckworth says. “It’s a fantastic method for fishing main-lake structures like winding creek channels and the edges of flats, places that require a lot of boat maneuvering to cover thoroughly. Because the heavy weights keep your lures running straight down, you can make sharp twists and turns with your boat and not get tangled up as you would when trolling long lines behind you. I can make a 35-degree turn and never get tangled.”

Duckworth power-trolls with bait-casting rods that are considerably shorter than McMullin’s 7-foot Berkley Lightning Rods with a medium-heavy action. Duckworth fishes from a custom 21-foot aluminum crappie boat that he built himself, running up to six rods at a time from the back and sides of the boat. His rig is powered by a 150-hp Honda four-stroke outboard, which he says is the ultimate for trolling.

Duckworth trolls 200 Series Bandit crankbaits exclusively, favoring this model for its ability to track laser-straight and its broad selection of colors.

“This crankbait runs about 10 feet deep on 10-pound line, but with the heavy sinkers, you can fish it down to 50 feet if you desire,” Duckworth says.

He uses two rigging methods — a three-way rig and a Carolina rig.

“For the three-way rig, I use 20-pound SpiderWire as my main line and attach a three-way swivel to the end,” Duckworth explains. “Off one of the



The combination of a heavy sinker and power-trolling makes for a surprisingly easy and effective way for weekend crappie anglers to catch more quality fish.

Manufacturers Mentioned

Bandit Lures
(662) 563-8450
www.banditlures.com

Berkley/Stren
(712) 336-1520
www.purefishing.com

The Crappie Company
(573) 624-2208
www.crappiecompany.com

Driftmaster rod holders
(803) 473-4927
www.driftmaster.com

Evinrude Outboards
(847) 689-7090
www.evinrude.com

Honda Outboards
(678) 339-2600
www.hondamarine.com

Lowrance Electronics
1-800-324-4781
www.lowrance.com

Mepps
(715) 623-2382
www.mepps.com

Ranger Boats
(870) 453-2222
www.rangerboats.com

swivel rings, I run a 1-foot drop line (14-pound Trilene mono) and attach a 5- to 6-ounce bell sinker to the end. Off the remaining swivel ring, I attach a 4-foot leader of 12-pound Berkley Vanish fluorocarbon and tie a Bandit crankbait to the tag end. This setup keeps the sinker and lure far enough apart so tangles are minimized, and the fish aren't spooked by the big weight."

The setup for the Carolina rig is similar to that used by bass fishermen when casting soft-plastic lures to deep structure, except the sinker is a lot heavier (4 ounces), and the rig is trolled, not dragged across the bottom.

"Again, I use 20-pound SpiderWire for my main line," Duckworth says. "It's perfect for trolling because its small diameter slices through the water and keeps your presentation totally vertical. The main line passes through a 4-ounce egg sinker, then a glass bead, and is tied to a barrel swivel. Then I run a 4-foot leader of 12-pound Vanish fluorocarbon to the crankbait."

With both rigs, Duckworth attaches

the crankbait to the leader with a snap so he can change colors quickly.

He places four rods on a custom-made elevated stern bracket outfitted with Driftmaster rod holders. He also puts rods in two 90-degree holders mounted to either side of the console.

"These rods are fished without weights so the crankbaits ride up higher in the water column," Duckworth adds.

While he operates the boat, Duckworth watches the two outside rods and his graph. His partner sits facing toward the back, monitoring the stern rods. Duckworth trolls between 2 and 3 mph, using his Lowrance Global Map GPS for guidance when targeting creek channels, flats, humps, etc.

While power-trolling with heavy sinkers requires some specialized gear and a good measure of patience, once you get those lines rigged and start trolling, you'll score incredible crappie catches. So give it a try on your home waters. You'll soon discover why it's the hottest crappie tactic going. 