



The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

Fish Don't Have Hands

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When do you set the hook? For many years I have read articles by outdoor writers and listened to pro fishermen discuss this topic. I would like to throw my thoughts and lures into the ring.

Hooking fish is, after all, the main ingredient in catching fish. It is the difference between a successful fishing trip and a nice boat ride. If you are a tournament fisherman, it is the difference between cashing a check and "better luck next time". In nearly every tournament I have fished, a missed fish comes back to haunt me—unless I win.

Hooking percentage is the function of three main variables: rod, line, and technique. Of course you first have to locate the fish, have the right bait, and the right presentation. However many times I have witnessed anglers fishing the same bait, in the same boat, have vastly different results. You are saying, "hey, it's just luck".

I don't believe in luck. Luck is a fickle thing that I don't have any control over. If successful tournament fishing came down to just dumb luck, I may as well play the lottery. Catching fish is a result of preparation, an understanding of your quarry, and concentration.

Rods.

There are many opinions about what kind of rod to use for different species. I have an arsenal of nearly 50 different rods and reels. Because I do a lot of guiding, I have several of each type for my guests to use. Nearly every one has it's own time, place, and purpose. None of them stay in the closet the whole season.

Throughout the season my walleye fishing may consist of fishing live bait rigs, jigs, bottom bouncers with spinner rigs, or crankbaits. It may mean casting, back trolling, bobber fishing, or trolling planer boards. Bass fishing may mean fishing soft plastics, jigs, spinnerbaits, top water, or flipping. Obviously, the same rod doesn't work for all these different tactics. I don't wish to take the time here to discuss the pros and cons of each. This article is not about picking the perfect fishing rod. It is about choosing the right rod for

the occasion. Remember, we are discussing hooking fish here.

I would like to concentrate my discussion of rods in this article to fishing live bait rigs and jigs. There are plenty of ideas and misconceptions among anglers using these tactics to get my point across.

The rod blank is the most important part of any rod. For live bait and jig fishing, the more graphite, the better sensitivity. Unless you have an unlimited budget, or a rod sponsor—an IM7 blank will do the trick. The difference in feel between an IM7 and an IM8 doesn't warrant the extra cost for most anglers.

In recent years there has been a trend among tournament anglers toward longer rods—especially, walleye anglers. Although I have several live bait rods that are 7 feet or longer, day in and day out I prefer a shorter rod from about 5-1/2 to 6 feet. I prefer a fast taper, medium light, or medium action rod. A fast taper means a light tip, but plenty of backbone to handle a big fish. Why the shorter rod? I believe I can feel bites a lot better with a shorter rod. It means there is less graphite for the signals to travel through to reach my hand. A shorter rod also has less wind resistance on windy days.

The rod handle is equally important to me. The reel seat should rest on the rod blank to provide as much feel as possible. I like rod handles that don't force me to grip the reel seat rings or threads.

Line.

Most of the praise bestowed on fishing lines these days is usually heaped on the high tech super braids like Berkley Fireline. Fireline has a small diameter and almost no stretch. Because of these attributes it provides an extremely sensitive link to the fish. I like to use Fireline for trolling crankbaits and in other situations when I have a lot of line out. The low stretch gives a lot more feedback to detect light bites and to see how the lure is running.

For live bait and jig fishing I prefer a clear monofilament. My line of choice is Berkley Sensation. It has a small diameter and low stretch. Both are important to not only fooling fish,

but to ensure hook ups. The small diameter allows the line to sink faster and is less visible to the fish. The low stretch provides the sensitivity I want along with solid hook sets.

Technique.

Here is where anglers differ in their approach. Ever since the Lindner brothers invented the Lindy Walking Sinker, walleye anglers have embraced the techniques Al and Ron taught us along with them. "Drop your bait slowly to the bottom. Leave the bail open and hold the line with your finger. When you feel a bite, drop the line and let the fish run for a few seconds. Close the bail. Slowly tighten up the line. When you feel the fish, set the hook with a sweep of the rod." Sound about right?

I have a tremendous amount of respect for both Al and Ron. However, over the years I have discovered that several things can go wrong with this approach. First, how far do you let the fish run. The more line you have out, the more stretch. Sometimes the line doesn't come off the spool smoothly. The fish can feel the tension and spit the bait. Next the bail doesn't always close properly. You try to set the hook and the line slips. Or the line wraps around the end of your rod and doesn't let you reel. Sound familiar?

How fish bite.

Before I get to my technique, let me explain how a fish takes a bait. Years ago I worked for a professional fishing organization. We had two large aquariums in our building where we were allowed to keep game fish for photography and study. I spent countless hours watching those fish whenever I could. What I learned has helped me understand things about fish that most anglers will never witness from above water.

Contrary to what most anglers believe, feeding fish don't nip at a bait. They don't really strike a bait. They open their mouths and suck the bait in. One second you see the bait, then it disappears. The softer the bait, the easier it is for the fish to inhale. Nightcrawlers, leeches, soft plastics, and small minnows are gone instantly. Large minnows take only a few seconds longer. I never once saw a walleye or bass bite a bait in half.

What does that mean to the angler? If you feel the fish, set the hook. Fish don't have hands! If they are holding on to your bait, guess what they are holding it with?

No matter what I am fishing for, I like to keep a tight line to my bait. If I am casting a jig in shallow water, I pick up the line as soon as the bait hits the water. I allow the bait to sink, but I keep picking up the slack as it falls. Watch your line, especially if it is windy. If you see it tighten or twitch, set the hook. You should keep your rod tip fairly low whenever possible to allow a firm hook set. If your rod tip is too high you will have to reel up line to get a good hook set. Many times the fish may have already spit the jig. Like a good batter or golfer, the best hook sets are mainly in the wrists.

When I am live bait rigging for walleyes, I use the heaviest sinker I need to keep my bait on the bottom and my line as vertical as possible. In shallow water you may be forced to let your line back a bit further to catch fish that may be spooked by your boat. Much of my walleye fishing is in depths greater than 20 feet. I almost always use at least a ½ ounce sinker. If I am fishing 30 feet or deeper I will go to a ¾ ounce. The less line you have out, the more likely you will feel subtle bites.

My technique:

Drop the line slowly through your fingers until the slip sinker reaches the bottom. I leave the bail open and hold the line with my finger. I am fishing as vertical as possible. If I drop deeper I let out a little line just until I feel the bottom and then hold it again. If I move shallower I take up line and reset. I fish with my rod just above the gunnels of the boat. Get a feel of your sinker and bait walking along the bottom. I subscribe to the short lift and drop method as I move along. Many times fish don't strike live bait very hard. Often times I simply notice a very subtle spongy feeling. When I feel anything different, a tap, a nudge, or a slight drag; I set the hook. I drop my rod tip towards the fish, and with my finger still on the line I set the hook. I usually just sweep the rod upwards in one smooth motion. Once I have the fish hooked, I close the bail and start reeling. I have just avoided most of the problems I discussed earlier. If something goes wrong with the reel or rod, the fish is still hooked.

Try this method the next time you are out on the water. See if your hooking percentage improves.

Please practice catch and release. Keep a few for the pan. Put the rest back for next time.