

Pre-Fishing with Gary Roach (Part 2)

"Holy cow! Gary, this is a big one. I think it's a muskie!" I shouted to legendary angler Gary Roach. We were pre-fishing for the In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail tournament to be held on the Fox Chain of Lakes, checking out spots, and looking for the hot bite.

The big fish had hammered a small jig that I pitched out toward a rocky shoreline on Pistakee Lake. It was tipped with half a night crawler, an excellent presentation for walleyes.

I held the rod high to get some leverage but the fish stripped out line and headed for the safety of a nearby boat dock. I could hear the drag on the reel go "zzzzzz" and felt the pumping of a heavy thug on the end of the line.



Roach is 68 and the oldest touring pro on the professional walleye circuit. He's not only a master angler, but a master marketer as well. Many products used by today's anglers have been invented or improved by him. The list is long: rods, crankbaits, jigs, spinner harnesses, trolling boards, and on and on. He even has a food product on the market, *Gary Roach's Fish Breeding Mix*. All his products are top shelf.

Professional angling is big business today, with all pros sponsored by various boat, outboard motor, and tackle manufacturers. It's necessary if one is to make a living as a professional fisherman.

Gary Roach leads the pack when it comes to combining business and fishin'.

The big fish bullied its way under the dock and I was sure the six-pound test line would be snapped on one of the underwater posts. "Oh, nooooo," I blurted. "I'm gonna lose her. I'm pretty sure it's a Muskie."

We had been having a terrific day on the water. The PWT, which pairs each pro with a co-angler, creates opportunities for the amateurs to learn from the tour professionals. Most pros pre-fish several days before the three-day tournament, allowing the co-anglers to meet and fish with several of them.

Roach and I had a lot of fun, joking and laughing, as we plied the Chain waters looking for spots that might yield quality fish for the tournament. I asked him if it would be like that come Wednesday.

"No," he said. "I tell the amateur right off that we'll have some fun, but this is serious business. I make my living doing this."

"We will fish eight hours each day, and concentration and focus is everything. Don't eat while you're fishing. You can eat your lunch while we're moving from spot to spot."

I asked him about talking and joking.

"Only when we're moving to spot to spot."

We both laughed at that, but I knew he was mostly serious. The tournament isn't only about money. It's about prestige and the desire to win. Some of the PWT anglers weren't even born when Roach began fishing the early walleye tournaments, and he still wants to show them why his nickname is "Mr. Walleye."

The strength of the fish began to yield to the quality of my light tackle, and gradually I got the fish to turn her head back toward me.

"Jim, it's a carp. I saw part of it."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah."

"A bugle mouth," Roach confirmed.

A couple of minutes later I maneuvered the carp to the side of the boat, where he scooped it up with the net. After snapping a few pictures, it was released back into the murky shallows of Pistakee, given another chance to try to snap some other angler's line. With lots of friendly rivalry in the boat during that day of practice, I said that I had won the carp tournament.



"Yeah, maybe so," came his reply. "But I kicked butt in the sheepshead one. I have such a hot stick for the "sheep of the deep" that Al Linder can't even touch me."

"Okay, hot stick. Let's organize an annual Gary Roach Invitational Sheepshead Tournament," was my quick response. "And we can use your fish breeding to cook up a batch of sheepers for shore lunch. Then we can see how good that stuff really is. Maybe it will turn rough fish into lobster!"

The PWT anglers are a friendly and nice bunch of guys. One might think they are hotshots and act that way. No so. Collectively, they are a class act.

When this column is published on Thursday, we will have completed one full tournament day and be well into the second. To check the leader board online, go to www.in-fisherman.com and click on "Professional Walleye Trail." You can follow Roach's progress on the professional side and mine on the co-angler's.

Gary Roach is the classiest angler in the class act known as the PWT. I wish him good luck. Oh, yeah. You might wonder whether we caught any walleyes during practice. Yup, but I can't tell you where, how many, and what size. You'll have to wait. It's tournament etiquette.

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