

Pre-Fishing with Tony Puccio (Part I)

I stood alone in sunny silence on the boat dock. The American flag hung lifelessly, still at half-mast in memory of the pope. There was nary a movement anywhere around. It seemed that no recent work had been done to spruce up the marina, that there was no expectation of the crowds to come in ten days' not the slightest clue that thousands of people would trample the grounds to watch the world's best walleye anglers come to the weigh-in.

It was a Twilight Zone of an experience on the Chain O' Lakes.

I was waiting for my good friend from Libertyville, pro fisherman John Nuebel, and Tony Puccio, a walleye fishing professional who plies the circuits. They were due to arrive with Tony's 21-foot Starcraft boat. Tony had never fished the Chain before, and with the In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail (PWWT) tournament to start on April 20, he needed to get experience on that body of water. Fast.

He and John are good friends, the two of them having been acquainted years ago when John fished the PWWT. Nuebel knows the Chain, and had volunteered to show Puccio the hot spots, the breaklines and depth contours, and what presentations work well. I was invited along to be the third stick, to experiment with other presentations, and to help determine what's going on. I thought you'd be interested to know how a pro approaches a lake he's never been on.

"I look at lake maps a lot and talk to locals," he said when asked about new places. "We're gonna run the lake, and do lots of looking."

And we did. With electronics monitoring every piece of the bottom, we motored around points, into bays, along gravel bars and over drop-offs. Tony observed everything with the eyes of seagull. He has an uncanny ability to watch other boats and remember where they were, where they moved to, and when they came back. It was quite impressive.

Listening carefully to Nuebel's instructions, he maneuvered the boat between the interconnected channels of the Chain lakes, alternately watching his GPS and the depthfinder. Occasionally, he punched in a waypoint, a reference point to which he might return. We eliminated a lot of unproductive water that Tony won't fish come tournament day, carefully marked certain areas with hard bottom and adjacent cover. On that day, we plied the upper Chain, investigating Channel, Catherine, Marie, Bluff, and a northern section of Fox. Water temperatures, which are very important at this time of the year, ranged from 53 in parts of Catherine to the lower 60s in Fox.

"Right now, I'm looking for warmer water where there's a hard bottom," Puccio noted. "Gravel, hard clay, clam beds' they all might be productive."

He won't spend much time in areas with mucky bottoms and cooler water temperatures, though.

"**◆**A fisheries biologist once told me that fish exhibit sluggish characteristics in cooler water temperatures, much more so than humans. If the water drops one degree in temperature, it would be similar to a seven degree drop in air temperature to humans."

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Given the geology of the Chain, we looked for subtle breaks in depth, changes of maybe one foot or less. We noted temperature changes, watched other boats, and tried to think like a fish in transition.

In transition? Yes, on that particular day, we guessed the fish were in transition from their spawning behavior, on the way to the places they'll spend most of the summer months. When the PWWT tournament starts this Wednesday, the anglers who figure out the transition might be the ones who bring home the trophies.

I will be one of those anglers. I anted up the \$600 co-angler (tournament parlance for amateur) fee. My pre-fishing continues today as you read this, tomorrow, Monday, and possibly Tuesday. Tournament action begins Wednesday. Come back to these pages to see what it's like to fish with the pros for a week as they pursue big dollars and huge prestige.



You can read other reporters' stories that will be written from the dock where I stood that morning. Maybe they will have watched the same flag I did as they wait for tournament anglers to come in. You can see their second-hand reports, not only in the News Sun

but other Chicago-area papers, as well. But, I will bring you along for the ride, and you can be in all the boats I'll be in. You can share every full-speed take off, feel each strike from a thumping walleye, and get to know my professional boat partners. You can watch the tournament pros net my every fish. Ahem.

There is, however, a confession that I must make. If you want to know what I'm really thinking about, if you want to know where my head is, my main goal is to not "zero" in the tournament, and to not finish last.

Wish me luck. And stay tuned.