

Tools For Early Season Success

by Steve Welch

Way back in the early eighties I grew too old to race ATV's and dirt bikes anymore so I needed a new obsession. So I got my first boat, bought for me by my then mother-in-law who needed a tax loophole and a gift was the perfect solution. Hey who am I to complain.

I was as thirsty for knowledge as a kid in pre school. The problem was that my friends who crappie fished were as tight-lipped as they still are today. I was out to prove to them and everyone that I could read and research and most of all just spend more time on the water in perfecting my passion for this new sport, crappie fishing.

It wasn't long before I was winning big crappie tournaments on Clinton. I once had a streak of seven in a row and one of them by myself. My partner back then and I were winning or placing in top five at all of them. He soured on tournaments though and would just rather fish so we quit for the most part. I then started my guide service and worked hard on getting it where it is today.

Early on I saw the advantage of logging everything down that I did that day on the water and what I saw. I started putting together patterns that hold true to this day. I immediately saw that surface temp. readings in the spring were crucial. I would get together with friends who fished and asked them what temps they got and none of them had a gauge or even cared.

Too me it was obvious that certain temps caused the fish to suspend in standing timber and certain temps got males moving towards the bank and certain temps brought females up on nests.

Back then we fished Clinton Lake a lot more and back then it was a much better crappie lake than it is today and I still believe the power plant has something to do with that. Anyway Clinton Lakes coves are full of hedge trees that spread out on the surface allowing the fish to hover right under the branches.

I noticed that with surface temps of 48 or better, this caused the fish to suspend and two or more days of steady full sun were the best. The trees would be in fifteen to twenty-five feet and the fish were down just a couple of feet. This still goes on there today but there isn't near the numbers of fish there were back before the plant came on line.

I then noticed that 50 degrees would get the males from the deep water up into the 6-10 foot range and 55 they would be even shallower and start to make nests. Sixty-two on up to sixty-eight would get the spawn under way. The males would remain shallow up until about mid seventy range low eighty and then give them a rest until you see mid eighty range and then you are on a summer pattern for them. This same pattern works at Shelbyville, Mark Twain or any other lake that has a lot of wood cover on the surface.

Another tool for success that I saw back in the early eighties that we used far before they became the norm that they are today is the long stout ten-foot crappie rod. We would buy a steelhead rod and wrap new eyelets on it. Stiff and strong was the word. We needed it to get the fish out of the heavy hedge. Today's rods are much lighter and aimed at different fishing situations. You can still get a good stiff rod if that is what you need.

That was the eighties and this is now. Back in 2000 I jumped on the GPS bandwagon and all my buddies followed as soon as they saw how accurate and handy they were. Oh yeah they jumped on that surface temp. gauge too. Didn't want me to get too far ahead of them.

My newest system has a thirty gig hard drive built in so I have up to date mapping of contours, old roads, foundations, boat ramps, barge lanes all buoyed off. I have two systems networked together to share waypoints and when I enter one on my back unit it automatically brings up that

same waypoint on my front unit. By having a GPS on my bow I can now stop short of my destination and sneak up over it on my trolling motor and they are all in color.

My buddies haven't jumped on the color bandwagon as of yet but soon they will be forced to, as new systems will most likely all be color. Don't fight it, once you get the hang of them you can easily tell if fish are in the cover by the darker color on the screen. I can tell you if the fish have left a stake bed on Kentucky Lake by using this technology. Brush is a little more difficult since the heavy branches will cast a darker color.

My newest tool is the side imaging from Humminbird. I can see out to the side of my boat 150 feet as well as under it from back and front with my Lowrance systems. I can search a lake so much quicker now. I can easily find an object that doesn't belong such as a stake bed or old tires for bluegill nests. Or for that matter even bluegill nests fanned in the bottom. I can see fish if they are close enough to the bottom and any stump on a flat. I can freeze the frame move my cursor over and get the waypoint from 150 feet away.

This year I will be sporting a new look up front on my Ranger. I have the Black Widow spider rig set up made by Tight Lok and I intend to use it on every tourney that involves tight lining. There are tourneys that I know I am throwing a cork and I don't want the clutter up front but all the rest of them I will have it in. I don't spider rig like most. I pull up short of a brush pile set my rods to hover just over them and slowly move over them and gradually let out line to get in the heart of it. Saturate it with bait and plastic. Reel up and move to the next brush pile and do it again. I have bait casters on all my outfits to quickly adjust depth and this system is deadly. I did this at the classic and the fall tourney that I fished back home and it is very effective. It just allows you to get those fish on top of a brush pile quickly before you spook them. Be ready though it is pure chaos with four to eight rods going off at the same time.