

Leblanc can't resist the lure of muskies

BY ERIC SHARP
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ST. CLAIR SHORES — The fishing lures are everywhere. They hang from basement rafters, from water pipes, from wires strung between the pipes. They fill wooden boxes and cardboard cartons, pickle jars and big tins, tackle boxes and World War II ammunition cases and cabinets.

Most are muskellunge lures, hand-carved from wood. But they come in all sizes and materials, the product of a restless, tinkering mind that never knows when to leave well enough alone.

Some are novelties, such as the one made from a rubber shark that was a child's bath toy. Another used to be an automobile spark plug, one started life as an aluminum cigar case, and there are even a couple that can't be displayed in polite society.

What all this bewildering assortment of perhaps 5,000 lures has in common is the small, bright-eyed man shuffling along on a cane below them. He created nearly all of them, and many bear his hand-written name or the initials "H.L."

And the light is still on at the work table where Homer Leblanc defies the rigors of 92 years and continues to work on new concepts.

Leblanc is Mr. Muskie to muskellunge fishermen around the globe, the Ted Williams of their sport — or more aptly the Arnold Palmer, because muskie fishermen usually do their sport as well as watch and read about it.

Leblanc will be honored with the Homer Leblanc Open Muskie Classic this weekend on Lake St. Clair and the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers.

Most older anglers like to say, "You should have seen how great fishing was when I was your age." But Leblanc says muskie fishing on Lake St. Clair is



HUGH GRANNUM/Detroit Free Press

Build a better lure, Homer Leblanc figures, and muskies will beat a path to your door.

HOMER DERBY

- **WHAT:** Homer Leblanc Open Muskie Classic.
- **WHEN:** Saturday-Sunday.
- **WHERE:** Lake St. Clair, Detroit and St. Clair rivers.
- **FEE:** \$100 per boat.
- **FIRST PRIZE:** \$2,500 (based on 50 entries).
- **INFORMATION:** Selfridge Sport & Tackle, 949-3474.

"better than ever. There's never been a depletion of muskies that I know of."

That draws instant agreement from Don Miller, a guide who trained under Leblanc and gives him the homage that aspiring chess players afford an international grandmaster.

"This summer has been exceptionally good," Miller said. "I've had more master angler certificates on my boat (10) than I'd normally get in three years. A master angler fish has to be 45

inches long and weigh over 20 pounds."

The muskellunge is the biggest member of the pike family. There are several subspecies, including the silver, tiger and northern muskies. The largest is the Great Lakes muskie, a subspecies found in Lake St. Clair.

The world record is 69 pounds, 14 ounces, but records of 19th century commercial fishermen make it plain 75-pound fish once were common and some might have reached 100. Today, any muskie more than 20 pounds is large, and more than 30 is a trophy.

"This is the best season I've seen since we went to a 40-inch minimum limit on Lake St. Clair," Miller says. "Muskies don't spawn until they're 36 inches, so years ago we were killing fish before they had a chance to reproduce. Before the 40-inch limit, you'd only get two, three fish over 40 inches every year. Now most anglers are releasing even master angler fish. They just take some measurements and some pictures and let them go."

Leblanc was a founder of the catch-and-release movement. In fact, he is

credited with pioneering probably 90 percent of the muskie tactics used today, including trolling so close to the boat that the lures rock in the propeller wash. About the only major tactic he didn't develop was the use of planer boards, which he adopted with enthusiasm when they showed up about 10 years ago.

"Thousands," Leblanc says when asked how many muskellunge he has caught. "I don't know how many. One guy once figured out it was 5,000. That might be a little high, but it has been a lot. What I'm most proud of is the people I've taught how to catch muskies. I've taught the techniques to 25,000 people."

Leblanc and Alma, his wife of 57 years, live on a canal yards from the lake where he has made his living for most of his adult life.

"Every muskie I've caught came out of Lake St. Clair," Leblanc says. "I've caught other fish in other places, but not muskies. It never seemed to make any sense to leave the best muskie lake in the world to fish for muskies somewhere else."