April post-spawn top 5

By Ev Tarrell
Avid hunter, fisherman, and outdoor enthusiast

Last week, I highlighted the opportunity to take big walleyes from Lake Mac in what is commonly referred to as the “transition period” between the spawn and the true early spring patterns. This transition period is staring us in the face, and with the recent spawn on the dam just past peak, we are approximately one-two weeks out from kickoff on some great chances at post-spawn giants.

The good news on this pattern on Big Mac, is again, this is straight forward fishing in very predictable locations, time frames, and depths. As long as the weather is favorable, this is fishing that is within reach of almost any semi-experienced walleye angler.

Here are my “Top 5” for making this time work for you on Big Mac in April.

1. Location, Location, Location. There is not another period on Big Mac when a complete list of “potential spots to fish for big walleyes” will be as short as it is in this time frame.

As I mentioned in my previous column, the fish are all east right now, simply following deep water contours west, and showing up on the predominant points and adjacent drop-offs.

On the north side of the lake, areas to target include the sandy shoreline between the dam and Haythorn Bay (commonly referred to as the “North Sand”), the “Castle” Area, Sand Point, and Otter Creek Point. On the south side of the lake, fish seem to bypass the eastern end of the lake quickly and the key area to focus on are the points between Kildare Bay and Van‘s Lake View.

Without a doubt, the points between the dam and Haythorn Bay, or again, the “North Sand,” are the most productive section of the lake to consider in this time frame. The western areas mentioned go slightly later than the east locations and vice versa obviously.

Note, however, the traveling fish we are discussing can be sucked into the quickly warming water within the shallower bays along their path. While this pattern can be incredible at times, it is not predictable pattern.

2. Rigging Rules. “Rigging” as it is commonly referred to is basically drifting or dragging “weight and bait.” Just like your grandpa did it! Some “vertical approaches” with jigs or dragging of jigs can be productive as well. Day in and day out, though, 6-8 pound mono, a #6 to #8 live bait hook, a 3 to 4½ foot mono snell, a barrel swivel holding a 3/8 to 1/2 ounce Lindy slip style sinker above, and you are dialed.

Bait choice is simple as well. I know I will get some arguments on this, but all sizes of minnows, leeches, and crawlers work at this time. I have caught numerous big fish on all of these baits.

We could lean on a counter of a bait shop, go through three pots of coffee, and never come to terms on the sense of a float on the hook, color of the hook, or how to hook a crawler.

Hate to tell you this, folks, but they are just “dumb brown fish.” Put on a Lindy rig, make sure your bait is lively, and keep your lines wet!

3. Depth/Boat Control. The right depth and the right speed is essential. I wish the fish held up a sign when I got there that told me what that combo was that day, but it hasn’t happened yet.

The fish on the deeper drops and points are most commonly in 22 to 30 foot. I have, however, taken some very nice fish as deep as 40 feet. The good news is that these fish tend to show up very well on a locator. Fish the depth where the fish are showing up on the locator or slightly shallower. Often times, the more active fish within a school will move slightly shallower as they become active and feed.

Boat control is extremely important. Think of boat control as “odds maximization.” The more your bait is in the right depth at the right speed, the better the chance of catching fish.

Yes, boat control is keeping the boat from “churning” all over and keeping your buddy’s line out of the prop but that’s more “chaos control.” Think of boat control as if you were trying to keep your bait in a single “terrace” on a winding hillside as you drifted across a pasture.

Keep all of your lines spread out in numerous terraces on that hillside and you got it nailed. The use of front and back electric motors, drift socks, etc., all come into play. For my money, drifting with the wind, using drift socks as needed to control your speed, and a front electric to pull yourself in and out to the right depth is the way to go.

4. “Move and stick.” While this is backwards from the way the old saying goes, this approach is perfect for this situation. Long drifts or “pulls” of your rigs along extensive segments of steep contours at consistent depths will produce fish. It definitely can be a “numbers game.”

That said, while focusing on key areas is still essential, you have to move and keep moving on and around these areas. On the other hand, there are still “spots on the spot” that concentrate fish and need a slightly different approach.

These “honey hole” type micro spots can usually be found as you drift larger areas and will either be exposed by your locator lighting up like a Christmas tree, your rod bending a lot from biting fish, or both. In fishing the smaller micro areas, run the same rig across a tighter location or possibly simply “hang the boat” over the top of the fish until they decide to bite.

5. Timing is critical. Two points here, folks. These fish are moving and the bite does not hold for extensive periods of time. The good news is that not all the fish finish spawning at the same time so new fish are just starting the trek west as others are well up the lake.

The key time frame is still a small window that hits approximately one to two weeks after the spawning activity on the dam seems to almost halt. For 2012, that feels to be shaping up to be the third week in April. A week after that, better fishing on the same pattern can be found farther west on the spots mentioned previously. This is not the type of fishing, though, where information is flowing from bait shops. You have to get out there yourself to really know what is going on.

Timing is also critical in terms of the time of day. The fish are far from gorging themselves like they will in later spring. They are conserving energy now and feed when that internal “light” goes off that tells them the time is right. I have sat on masses of fish for hours on end and almost given up only to catch numerous fish in a brief period. Don’t be afraid to wait them out if you find the fish, folks.

No guarantees that bites are inevitable, but usually the fish will feed at some point during the day. Early morning and later afternoons have been the most productive times for me over the

years. I prefer pre-storm conditions or high pressure sunny days with wind.

At the end of the day, this is a simple pattern that happens in simple places and can yield big walleyes. Except for the weather, which can be extremely challenging in April on Mac, it's as easy walleye fishing as you will experience on the lake all year. Snags are the exceptions (except for farther west) and the fish are fairly easy to find with the use of a locator. It's basically a "black and white" pattern on Mac and that is rare.

If I had to supply the main course for a fish fry, there are more predictable and more productive times to be out there. If you want a shot at a 30-inch giant, pick the last two weeks of April, focus on the deeper contours on or around major points and stick with it. If it is slow all day and you feel like packing it in, you know what Kenny would say, "one more pass."

See you out there.