

# Great Lakes Angler

THE AUTHORITY ON BASS AND TROUT

## PERCH ON ICE

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## TROPHY LAKE TROUT

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## ICE FLOES AND RAINBOWS

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## MAPPING A WAY TO GREAT LAKES WALLEYE

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Robert Gwizdz with a shallow water perch.



**GLANGLER.COM: ON TOP OF FISHING**



The AQ proved to be a stable fishing platform in stiff crosswinds.

## 'TOON IN TO GREAT LAKES FISHING

I'm no longer a skeptic about the suitability of a pontoon boat for fishing on the Great Lakes. In fact, in light of Angler Qwest and other brands of Tri-Toons with big motors now appearing, I expect more and more of them to appear in other "necks of the woods" around the Great Lakes.

The man sitting across from me at a dinner conference at Lake of the Woods had a name tag reading: Roger Niesen - Angler Qwest. Making small talk, as much as anything, I asked about Angler Qwest. What he told me quickly went from small talk to an in-depth discussion and eventually several excellent days of Great Lakes fishing.

I don't know what answer I expected when I asked, "So what's Angler Qwest?" If you've never heard of Angler Qwest, what do you think it is? I bet you didn't picture a pontoon boat.

"We make pontoon boats for fishing," he said.

"Nice," I said, picturing a hi-tech raft filled with kids, Snoopy poles, bobbers and bluegills on a Midwestern lake or reservoir.

"I don't see many pontoon boats where I normally fish," I said. "Not surprising," Niesen said. "Most of our boats are used on the Great Lakes."

What? I've fished all five Great Lakes. I fish on Lake Michigan several days each week from early March into October. The first

time I fished a Great Lake the Beatles had just scored their first hit record.

I've not kept exact statistics about the number of pontoon boats I've seen on the Great Lakes, but I wouldn't need a spread sheet to keep the tally. I wouldn't even need two hand's worth of fingers. I've seen pontoons on Great Lakes waters, at least twice, maybe as many as three times.

Having just met Niesen, I didn't want to just say, "BS." But I did say, "Well, I fish mostly on the southern end of Lake Michigan and I haven't seen many pontoon boats in my neck of the woods."

I don't remember the entire conversation, but in the end Niesen offered to bring his Angler Qwest "Great Lakes 'toon" down to my neck of the woods to give me a first hand experience. I didn't say no, but I was skeptical.

Niesen actually had his Angler Qwest pontoon at the conference. I'd seen it earlier in the day as it came zipping back from the open waters of Lake of the Woods with a half dozen (or more)

people on board. I say "zipping" because it was probably the fastest pontoon I'd ever seen—throwing a wake at well over 30 miles per hour. (Almost 40 he told me later.)

The next morning I met with Roger and Brad Dupuie (Angler Qwest Executive Director) at the docks for closer look at the boat. I quickly became less skeptical.

I'm not a "boat review writer" and most boat reviews I read are long on technical details and short on practical details. Still, let me get some of the technical stuff out of the way.

Unlike Grandpa's pontoon down at Lake Runamuck, the 824 Pro Troll Deluxe Niesen trailered up from Wisconsin was a "tri-toon" meaning it has three pontoon tubes under the deck for floatation rather than grandpa's twin tube model. That's a lot more floatation, out of the docks. It allows it to be rated for a bigger motor on the back—much bigger. Niesen's boat sported a 250 HP, four stroke engine. The 824 number stands for eight feet wide, 24 feet long.

From the center console helm to the stern it's more like an offshore saltwater boat than a pontoon. One major difference—most CC conventional boats are short on deck space aft of the console. The 824 isn't.

Even with the large, built-in livewell/cooler, seat just aft of the driver's seat there are acres of open deck with plenty of room for anglers, nets, tackle packs and most importantly, room to fish, room for fish flopping on the floor and still more room for someone resetting the rod that caused the fish to be flopping on the floor all at the same time. I'm getting ahead of myself.

The area forward of the helm console looks more like grandpa's 'toon. Comfortable bench seats would hold three or four people on each side (the 824's legal load limit is 13 people) with plenty of room for coolers and other gear.

What doesn't look like a conventional pontoon is a short open bow deck fitted with a pair of pedestal seats and a 36V trolling motor. "Great for perch or vertical jigging for walleyes," Niesen said.

I took all this in with a quick glance. What made the boat look like a Great Lakes trolling rig, however, was the Traxtech track system mounted along each gunwale, festooned with an array of rod holders. Even more was the sturdy radar arch up and over the console which serves as a mount for an overhead, rocket-launcher style rod holder array, a vertical track system to position side-planer rod holders as well as a mounting location for in-line planer board tether wheels. The overhead arch also anchors the rear of a bimini top extending from the center console forward over the entire front seating area.

All of this is great, but still, a pontoon on the Great Lakes? There are reasons most Great Lakes anglers (or other boaters) ride around in boats with deep-vee or semi-vee hulls. There's a reason

I don't come back to port on warm summer days and see Gramps and the kids putting around the pier heads on their motorized rafts. Those reasons are simple and mostly have to do with wind, waves, whitecaps and wakes.

First, the twin tube 'toons suitable for inland lakes aren't designed for big water use. Specifically, with only two pontoons under the deck, they don't float as high out of the water and they don't have the buoyancy to lift the craft up and over on coming waves. The result is even in a modest (by Great Lake standards) two foot chop, many of the waves will slop up on the deck when trolling or not under power. At worst, when the pontoon is under power, instead of cutting into and rising over the crest, a heavy wave can pile on board and into the surround at the bow. At best, the pontoon will come to an abrupt stop, at worst the boat will threaten to pitch-pole forward as the bow drives into the wave instead of over it and the weight of the water pushes down on the



In some areas of the Great Lakes pontoons are catching on.

front of the boat.

I doubt it would go completely over, since as the bow sinks the outboard at the stern rises up out of the water and the boat loses all forward propulsion. I've seen it happen on inland lakes when hitting big wakes, once on a pontoon boat I was driving. It's an abrupt and wet incident that would have some of the grandkids screaming and others cheering for more.

That's why they aren't "seaworthy suitable." How about Great Lakes durable?

I've been on a number and brands of pontoon boats on inland lakes and when riding on 'toons with a little mileage on them I've seen a fair share of them with patches, repairs and wire and duct tape reinforcements. Some models, it appeared, relied on super glue and duct tape to get them out of the factory. Almost all seemed to rely on pop rivets more than welding.

The point is, they aren't built to handle the stress of big water boating. Even welds can break but they are far stronger than rivets. Most aluminum boats designed for Great Lakes and saltwater use feature all welded construction. I've

owned name brand aluminum boats built for inland lakes. Every one, after a few years developed loose, leaky rivets and resulting in aluminum flex in places not designed to be flexible. I trust duct tape about as much as I put faith in pop rivets.

## TO THE TEST

I didn't crawl into the bowels of the Angler Qwest pontoon up at Lake of the Woods to check welds, rivets or duct tape. The parts I could see were solidly welded. Overall, it looked very solidly built and though I was skeptical, I was willing to give the boat a try and I had just the group of fishermen to try it.

Every spring in early April a "coat-tail cousin" of mine from Iowa and a few of his friends show up at my house to get in on Indiana's "spring-coho" fun. They've been coming for over 20 years and have become experienced fishermen. It's fun to have them along since I can sit back and let them do most of the work—setting lines, netting fish, even cleaning the catch.

They bring a lot of stuff with them. My boat is usually packed solid with drink coolers, breakfast boxes, lunch coolers and boat-bags filled with raingear and extra clothes. We'd put the pontoon to the test.

We actually didn't use Neisen's boat. Dupuie trailered his Angler Qwest 824—the one he normally keeps at Saginaw Bay—over to East Chicago, Indiana. It was similarly equipped to Niesen's but this one had a 300 Suzuki on the stern and he'd put a pair of Traxtech downriggers on each corner.

We were faced with far less than ideal conditions for fishing, but perfect conditions for giving the pontoon a Great Lakes sea trial. Weather predictions for day one featured a cold front sweeping down the lake in early afternoon, with north winds and storms. The precursor to a spring cold front is always strong southwest winds ahead of the front and this day was no exception.

Indiana's Lake County lakefront is almost totally industrialized with harbors and breakwalls jutting out strategically to facilitate iron ore carriers, cargo ships and barge traffic. They also provide great places to fish when the cohos are nearshore in early April.

I picked a spot more due to weather conditions than fishing reports to start. A steelmill peninsula blocked the waves, but with only a couple of fish in the cooler after an hour, it was time to move. That provided our first serious test.

Coming around the end of the steel mill, the 20 knot wind was blowing across four miles of open lake. Waves were two to four feet (far fewer twos than fours) and the crests were scarcely 10 yards apart. In my boat, I'd have had to slow to 10 miles per hour to keep the bow up and negotiate the chop more or less comfortably.

Dupuie turned into the chop, boosted the throttle which raised the bow several inches and plowed head on into the waves.

Slapping across four foot waves in any 24-foot boat isn't going to be silky smooth, but unlike a conventionally hulled boat where each wave would bounce the boat significantly, at best, and pound the hull if a bit too much speed was applied, there was no pounding.

The boat certainly lifted and fell with the waves, but there was no pounding down into the wave trough or an explosion of spray as the bow penetrated the next wave. I was standing next to the helm where I could see the GPS display and was amazed we were going 22 miles per hour through that slop! Score one for the Angler Qwest.

Our next stop was several miles down the shore by a different steel mill. There, the sheet piling shoreline runs southeast to northwest with water thirty feet deep right up to the shore. The wind was blowing straight offshore so we had nearly calm conditions in which to fish. I've fished there in similar conditions dozens of times.

Though there are no waves with which to contend, trolling in a 20 knot crosswind isn't easy—at least in my boat. Try to parallel the shore and the boat will soon push farther and farther out. Often the fish are almost up against the steel wall and the helmsman has to "crab"

towards the shore hard enough the lines are actually flowing back off the boat's rear corner, not off the stern.

I assumed the helm for part of the morning and was surprised how it handled in the strong crosswind. Sure, I had to crab towards the shore a few degrees, but not much more than that and it wasn't a continuous battle. The three tubes under the deck are like three giant hull

strakes. Additionally, unlike in a vee hulled craft where most of the flotation is in the rear half of the vessel allowing the wind to push the front of the boat easier than the rear of the boat.

That's why vee-hulled boats usually drift stern into the wind. In the 824, the tubes provide the same amount of flotation the full length of the craft. The pontoon naturally moves forward and only reluctantly pushes to the side.

Rain clouds associated with the cold front on the horizon ended day one and as we pulled into the East Chicago Marina, the wind switched and the temperature dropped. What would that mean for tomorrow?

The day dawned bright, clear and windless. Ideal, except the hotspot we'd located the day before was seven miles down the shore—seven miles of open water which had been exposed to the north winds and storms which blew through yesterday and overnight. The south end of Lake Michigan takes a long time to lay down after a north blow since the waves were built over hundreds of miles of open lake. With the wind almost calm, what we faced was leftover rollers and swells from four to six feet though very few breaking or cresting waves.

Again, comparing the Angler Qwest to my boat, I'd have had a

comfortable running speed in the middle teens in those conditions. On the pontoon pushing the speed to 30 mph didn't seem reckless, at all. We passed several boats heading to the same area we planned to fish. No one passed us.

The fishing was spectacular and with everyone now comfortable with the rig and rigging, we had fish on the line, fish on the deck, lines being set and a generally hub of activity behind the center console. I just got out of the way and retreated to one of the bow seats to watch the show and for coffee and donuts.

We easily ran three planer board lines on each side, a pair of downriggers and one Dipsey Diver on each side. There was room for more but with all 10 lines catching cohos, no need. On the way back, the lake was flattening out nicely so Dupuie threw all 300 horses into the ride. The GPS topped out at 46 mph, seven guys, tackle, coolers and a limit of cohos on board.

## THE OTHER NECK OF THE WOODS

Dateline: Late July on Saginaw Bay - Linwood Beach Marina. This is one of the "Woods Necks" where people commonly fish the Great Lakes on pontoon boats. I didn't count the number of 'toons verses Vee-hulled boats, in the slips, but I'd have needed far more than just fingers and toes to keep track. Whether or not Sag Bay qualifies as "Great Lakes" waters to your way of thinking, it does to me. It's 25 miles wide, over 40 miles long and northeast winds can fetch into the bay over 150 miles of open Lake Huron all the way from Canada. It's roughly the size of Lake Erie's Western Basin.

Not only do plenty of Saginaw Bay boaters use pontoons (many are Angler Qwest models) Lance Valentine, a full time charter captain who fishes Sag Bay all summer has been putting his clients on an 824 for the past two seasons.

My wife and I spent one afternoon with Dupuie on the same boat we'd fished in "my neck of the woods" in April then the next morning we hopped over to Valentine's boat. I mention bringing my wife along only because she's not the fishing addict I am. I can count the number of times she's been on my boat on Lake Michigan using my one hand, finger-tally system. When I told her of my plans to go to Saginaw Bay to fish on pontoon boats, she was all in.

Valentine wasn't surprised. "When I switched to a pontoon instead of a conventional boat for my charters here on the Bay," he said, "I saw an immediate jump in the number of family groups calling and booking trips. Used to be mom, sister and perhaps Grandma stayed on the shore while the guys in the family fished. Now, all of them come along. Sometimes they all join in on the fishing, sometimes the non-fisher people sit in the front and enjoy a day on the water while the guys stay in the back and catch walleyes."

My wife, Peggy, tried both spots and enjoyed each.

## LET'S TALK MONEY

New boats are expensive, especially if you are shopping for a boat seaworthy enough to handle reasonable Great Lakes fishing conditions, especially if shopping for a vessel large enough to handle six passengers if you want to use the boat with an OUPV Coast Guard Captain's License or roomy enough to bring along friends and family without cramping anyone's style.

Pick a name brand boat meeting these criteria, comparably equipped to the Angler Qwest boat in this article, add the electronics other gear. Power it with enough horses to push it along at 30 to 40 miles per hour and put it on a trailer. Expect to be writing a check at or over the six figure mark

Dupuie said his fully equipped 824 Pro Troll Deluxe would retail in the \$70K range—that's with the 300 HP motor, 36V Motor-guide electric on the bow, high-end Lowrance Sonar/Chart Plotter,



*The GLA test trip produced eye opening insights and plenty of fish.*

autopilot and trailer.

Before heading out with Dupuie, he topped off his gas tank. The pump kicked off at 19.5 gallons. "Seems right," Brad said, "I filled the tank before the last trip. We went out 12 miles, trolled for five hours and then 12 miles back.

## ON THE ROAD

Dupuie trailered his boat to southern Lake Michigan from central Michigan with a full-sized Chevy Silverado. The first Angler Qwest pontoon I saw followed Niesen from near Madison, Wisconsin to Lake of the Woods. The Pro Troll Deluxe rolls out the door weighing in at 2745 pounds. The Suzuki 300 adds about 600 pounds more. Fill the tank with gas, add tackle, riggers and other gear and it's still a load any full sized truck or SUV can easily tug from home to the water.

The twin-axle trailer has a full wheel base and is a float-on, float-off bunk style, similar to conventional boat trailers. I watched them launch and load it twice with no more effort than floating or loading any conventional boat.

"On the trailer, the pontoon sits a bit higher than boats of a similar size," Dupuie said. "It may sway a bit more on sharp turns or driving in a strong crosswind, otherwise, it's not much different than pulling any other boat."

The current 8' wide Qwest Pontoons (or even if they widen them to 8' 6" as rumored) don't need any special permits or suffer any wide-load restrictions.