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Capt. Chris Harvey of Black Pearl Sportfishing with a big bass that ate a horse bunker spoon pulled with the current. On many days, experimentation is necessary in order to determine the most effective trolling presentation.

Spoon Feeding Bass Part 3: The Intangibles

Editor's Note: This article represents the third and final installment in a three-part series on trolling spoons for striped bass. Part one and two can be found in our December 2008 and January 2009 issues respectively. Back issues can be purchased for \$3.50 each by calling toll free (877) NJ-Angler.

This is the third section of an in-depth article detailing how to catch striped bass by trolling for them with spoons. In the first two parts, we detailed setting up wire and super braid outfits, the types of spoons that work best and the equipment, like rod riggers, that one will need to drag up stripers consistently. In this final article, we will put it all together as we determine trolling speed, depth, structure, boat handling on the troll and which spoons to use, including why and when to use them.

Trolling speeds

The first question asked by anglers who are not accustomed to trolling with spoons is usually, "How fast should I troll?" On internet bulletin boards and fishing forums there are as many answers as Carter has little

liver pills. This author has seen 2.5 knots, 5.2 knots, between 0 and 15 meters per second, 4 kph, 3.23968463 knots, the speed of sound and a few more that will remain unmentioned. Everyone has an opinion and some insist that their preference in speed is authoritative. It's enough to make one's head spin! Among all those answers, the astute angler might find the correct one. The correct trolling speed for spoons is "when the spoon is working the very best it can"; and how fast that is must be determined.

Fluid speed, or in other words the lures speed in the water, is very much like what air speed is to an aircraft. This fluid speed determines the speed over ground (SOG), or in this case, the boat's speed, and we have to figure out what that speed is. Fluid speed changes with current, tides, wind and other factors, regardless of the boat's SOG.

Another point to consider is not all spoons troll effectively at the same speed. Usually an angler can troll dissimilar spoons together, but there are times when they may have to use two of the same kind at the same time to get them both performing optimally at the same speed.

The easiest way to determine correct speed is to watch one of the spoons work and take a mental note of how fast the rod tip is pulsing. To do this, hold the rod over the side as far out as possible to get clear of the wake, while keeping the tip a few inches off the water. Then, send the spoon back about 20 to 30 feet where it can still be seen swimming. Have the helmsman put the boat at idle speed and slowly bump it up while observing the spoon. Have him increase the speed at 100 rpm increments and watch the spoon swim. At some point the spoon will begin a very slow wobble and as trolling speed increases, it will pump harder and harder until it starts to spin. Have him go back down to the approximate speed in between the two limits and make a mental note of how fast the rod tip is bouncing. It will probably be equal to one's heartbeat when they're a little excited, or about 80-beats per minute. That's the right speed!

How many knots or mph is that? Don't worry about it! At times the boat will be going cross current, with current, against current, with or against the wind. The SOG could be anywhere from near zero to eight or 10 mph,

and it is likely to change. Ignore SOG, concentrate on keeping the rod tip bouncing at the correct rate, and the spoon will always be working as it was intended to work. That's all there is to it.

Trolling depth

The next most common question is, "How deep should I be trolling." When using 50-pound test wire, the rule of thumb is that for every 10 feet of wire line sent out, the spoon's depth will increase by 1 foot. Therefore, 150 feet of wire should get one's spoon down about 15 feet. Keep in mind that if one is trolling faster than the correct speed for the spoon, its depth will be less and visa-versa. When using 80-pound test super braid, a 4 to 6-ounce drail will be the equivalent of 150-feet of wire and put the spoon down to the same depth. Note that downgrading to 50 or 30-pound braid will get it down even further with the same length of drop-back. I can't tell you how much since I no longer use the lighter braid for reasons mentioned in part one of this article series.

Those who don't have confidence in their depth control need to gain that confidence to be able to troll effectively. It will take a few minutes, but gaining and having confidence is sometimes the name of the game when it comes to fishing, and trolling is no exception. With confidence, even if one is not hooking up, at least they know that they are doing the right thing. Time will be saved by eliminating unproductive water and one won't be floundering around trying tactics that are altogether wrong.

To gain this confidence in depth control, run to an area where you know the bottom is sandy. Go to a place where there are no rocks, weeds or other hazards to trolling tackle. Start out in an area that is from 15 to 20-feet deep, as marked on the depth sounder. Now send in the appropriate amount of line and adjust speed to be sure the spoon is working correctly. For example, with 200 feet of wire in 20 feet of water, the spoon should occasionally be ticking the bottom. If not, let out more line until it does. Once it ticks the bottom constantly, shorten up until the ticking stops. Note that different brands of spoons may run a little deeper or shallower than the 10-foot back, 1-foot down rule of thumb. This test gives anglers a definitive starting point as far as depth verses drop-back, and from that point, one can adjust the drop-back at different depths accordingly. Remember, the drop-back starts where the line enters the water. The same sort of test can apply to braid. By doing this a few times, anglers will

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have gained the confidence in depth control that they may have been lacking.

It is best to get down to about the bottom third of the water column. Some anglers try to keep their spoons as close to the bottom as they can without hanging up on snags. This author hasn't found that to be necessary. When I mark bass, they're seldom hugging the bottom. In 30 feet of water I usually mark them at around 20 feet, so the bottom third of the water column seems right. What this interpolates to be is that in 30 feet of water, 200 feet of drop-back works out perfectly with wire.

Of course, if we're working birds and all the action is on top, all we need to do is troll around the edges of the blitz with a 150-foot drop-back.

Boat handling on the troll

After listening to all the reports, reading newspaper articles, going on internet bulletin boards, relying on instincts and past experiences anglers can get a pretty good idea where the fish are. Once they get there, they may start off with a bang, as the depth finder starts marking fish and they see other anglers in the fleet hooking up. Too bad it doesn't always go that way. Sometimes a few guys are nailing fish but most are not. If fish are known to be in the area but the action is slow, it just might be the direction in which one is trolling. Direction can be critical in channels or close to the beach in shallower water. This angler's theory is that when one trolls against the current, they are coming up

behind the bass, which are usually facing into the current. The SOG can be almost nothing in a strong current and fish have time to hear and feel the spoon coming long before they see it. As it comes up on or runs past them they have plenty of time to figure out that it's nothing they want to eat. There is no urgency to hit it before it's gone.

On the other hand, trolling with a strong current of 3 to 5 knots, to get the spoons working correctly the SOG might be as high as 8 knots. At those higher speeds bass

will still hear it coming before they see it, however, their senses tell them it's going pretty fast so when it comes into view the instinct to grab it takes hold. This reaction is triggered by the instinctual urge bass have to take a shot at fleeing prey before it's gone. While no one can profess to know what fish are thinking or why they strike, it's a theory which works great for this

angler and those to whom I have passed the technique. In fact, there are times when we can't get as much as a hit while trolling in one direction but hookup every time trolling in another. When that happens, after hooking up and landing my fish, we will run outside, back up and above the hot spot, and troll through it again in the direction that works.

Let's get back to the fleet where a few anglers are catching, but most are not. Watch the guys that are doing better than most to see if they are connecting in one direction more than others. Set your troll on the

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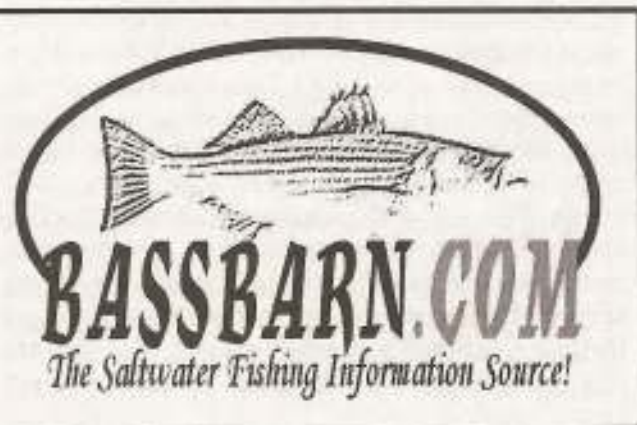
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same course and see if the action improves. If alone, and trolling marks without any luck, don't give into the notion that the bass are just not hitting today. Try changing directions, even if current is not a factor. If unsuccessful after passing over fish, go back over them in the opposite direction. If that doesn't work, go perpendicular to those courses and back again in the opposite perpendicular direction. Usually, an angler can find a trolling direction that gets the bass into a more cooperative mood. Trolling speeds with and against the current can be hard to determine when out there with no points of reference. At times, the only way to figure it out is to keep the spoon working correctly, while taking note of the boat's SOG.

Just a little more about boat handling; tight turns can be a disaster. Sometimes they can't be avoided in a crowded fleet, especially when there are skippers who have no idea that there are rules of the road, and that the trolling vessel has the right of way. Thus, when trolling, eventually one will have to make a tight turn.

Inside lines can sink and catch the 'Big Cork' or worse yet, cross over and do the Virginia reel. If it looks like this situation may occur, have the deck crew crank the inside lines in as fast as possible while speeding up the

boat. Sometimes I just have to come to a stop and crank in all the lines. I don't have a happy face when this happens, but there is usually no other choice, and there is no point in getting into an argument on the water.

Structure

Structure is another important consideration when trolling spoons for striped bass. Structure can be anything from a high spot as little as 2 feet higher than the surrounding area, or a little dip in an area, a patch of rocks, a sandy spot within a rocky area, a rocky spot within a sandy area or a muscle bed. Even a little rough spot with grass growing on it is viable structure. An old wooden wreck, one that has rotted away with time and there's not much of it left, is a great place to troll with spoons. It's all structure to fish.

Most charts show structure, but a lot of guys don't bother with the small stuff. With a GPS alone one might not be able to find these small spots. However, a combination of a chart and GPS will help anglers zero in on them. Don't pass up trolling over these benign locations. Once found, anglers might find themselves all alone plucking out a few fish and adding to their arsenal

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of productive locations.

There are other areas that can be very productive, which might not qualify as structure. Here's where a chart comes into play again. A freshwater lake or pond outlet attracts many types of bait,

especially in the fall and early spring when herring are looking for a place to spawn. If the water flow is low, they will mill around in the area waiting for better conditions, like a good rain or a full moon tide, before they run up into the outlet. Needless to say, if herring are hanging out bass will be right there looking for them.

Some beach areas drop off faster than others. They too are good spots to try. A chart will pinpoint them best of all. Even with all the advances in modern day electronics, don't throw away those charts. Programming numbers from a chart into a GPS will certainly make any angler a better detective.

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One more area that may have no structure at all is where two currents of different bodies of water converge. You may not be able to see them, the water may be deeper than you like to fish but for some reason they produce when fish are scarce.

The current here in New Jersey generally runs south to north, so an outgoing tide on a bay like Delaware Bay or Raritan Bay, will have one of these undetectable mix-masters coming from it. These areas won't be obvious, so when the bite is slow, it pays to cruise around with some spoons out and see what happens. If the jackpot is hit, save the numbers on a GPS. These breaks will wander around with different moons and varying wind conditions, but they will generally be in the same locale. If it does, expand the trolling area a bit to locate the break again.

Trolling structure is no big deal. Just go out there and

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give it hell. There are only a few special considerations one must take into account when trolling over structure. If the boat is one of the first on the scene when targeting a high spot, bass will generally be on top of it. It's easy enough to put out the appropriate amount of line and start hooking up with fish. As time goes by, and boat traffic increases, the fish will leave, and head to the deeper surrounding areas. Therefore, fish deeper when the bite slows.

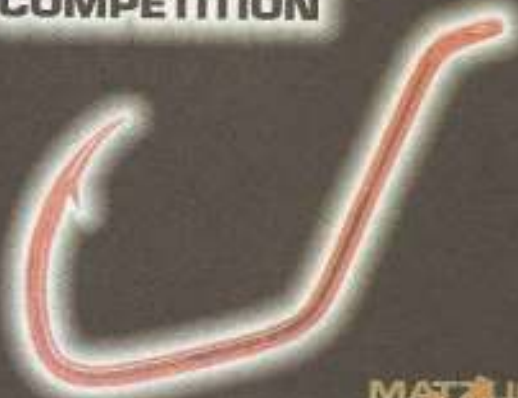
Anglers will also have to adjust their depth from deep to shallow as they approach and cross a lump, especially if it has any considerable amount of rise. When the captain sees it rising up on the depth finder, they will need to have the anglers on deck shorten up to the appropriate length. I do it by calling out, "NOW." Dropping off the top of the hump is the same but in reverse. This technique is very effective and anglers will continue catching bass as long as the boat traffic doesn't become insane. If the bass completely run out of the area and shore is not too far away chances are many bass will head that way. Therefore, before leaving the area entirely, try trolling inshore of the fleet of boats.

When fishing a hole there are two ways to fish it. I like to take my boat out of gear and let it slide into the hole.



Herring spoons, like these designed by the author for TGT Tackle, are dynamite selections early and late in the season, or whenever herring are on the striper's dinner menu. They are always most productive when painted half blue.

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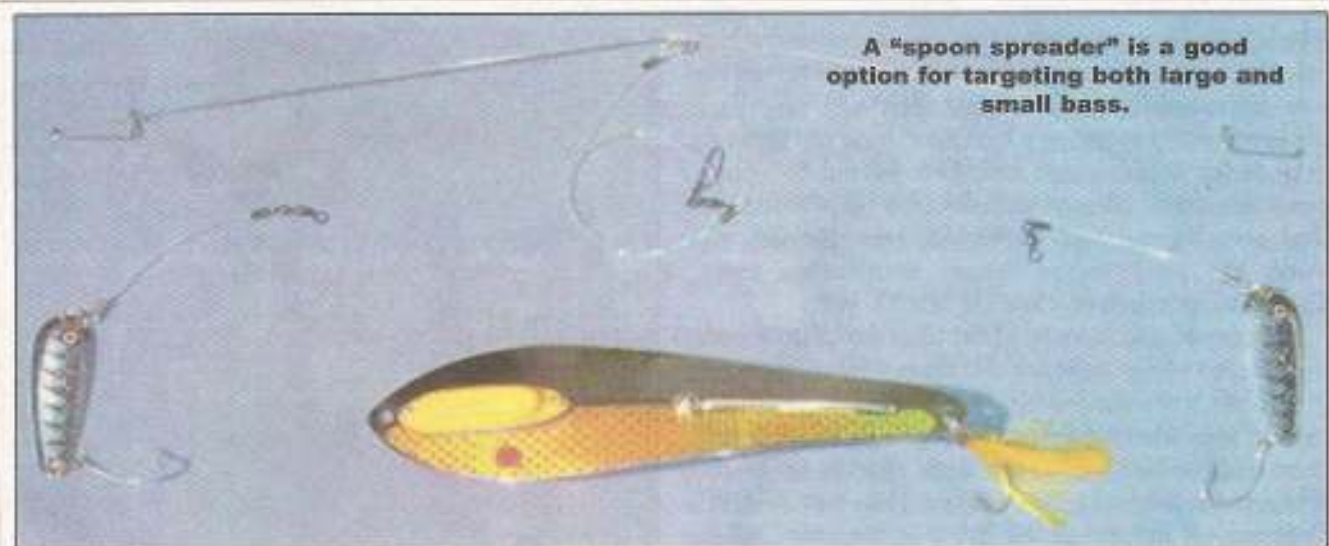
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A "spoon spreader" is a good option for targeting both large and small bass.

My spoons will go dead and maybe flutter a bit on their way down. When I hit bottom or think my spoons have sunk deep enough, I put my boat back into gear and give it some gas. My spoons will start swimming upward rapidly, which creates a trolling presentation that drives bass crazy. Those who try it have this author's guarantee that they'll do well. An alternate method of fishing a hole is to have the anglers on deck let out more line while passing over it. However, dropping into the hole creates an entirely different and better presentation, and it's less work too.

Snags

Snags are always possible when fishing structure. If one does get hung up, don't pull hard until the rig breaks. Instead, go back over it in the opposite direction and jiggle the line. Anglers should avoid flexing the rod while pulling. Jiggle the rod with a light touch, allowing the line to go slack on the down swing. Jiggle, jiggle, jig-

gle and then jiggle some more. This author can't remember a time when I couldn't jiggle a snag free. Of course if one spears an old piece of anchor line lying on the bottom, the spoon is more than likely history.

Using the right spoon

We all want to match the hatch. However, if there's no hatch to match, a smaller herring-style spoon is a good one to try first. Early in the season and very late in the season is the time when herring are present in most areas. The first of the Ten Commandments for bass is "If thou seeith a herring, thou must eatith it." After all, who hasn't caught a pot bellied bass with a few herring tails sticking out of its throat? Even more amazing, it was trying to get another one down. When herring are around, a spoon painted half blue works best.

As the season progresses, mossbunker will migrate north from their primary wintering haunts in Chesapeake Bay. Since bunker spawn five times a year,

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one can assume that their calling in life is to be eaten by other fish. Therefore, when one starts to see bunker in the area it's time to change over to this author's favorite spoons, which are bunker spoons. Bunker spoons will catch shorts all the way up to big old cows. When blues invade the area, bunker spoons will hold up and not get wrecked like many plugs and soft plastics will.

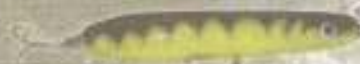
Another favorite is the giant bunker spoon, sometimes called a "horse bunker spoon". These huge slabs of metal are at their best when we know the big fish are finally here on the tails of all those smaller fish. Horse spoons will cull the catch, and usually account for 30-pound fish or better when used.

During autumn, when juvenile bunker, rain fish, sand eels and other small forage are migrating south for the winter, with thousands of short bass on their tails, some anglers switch over to smaller lures. This trolling aficionado doesn't. By sticking to a big spoon game plan I can usually catch a couple of nice ones amidst all of the rats. If conditions are really tough, use a spoon spreader, which has two peanut bunker-sized spoons on each end, and a full-sized bunker spoon on a longer center drop. This will usually drag up some action.




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However, if all I can do is catch a bunch of shorts where I am, I will leave fish to catch real fish!

Some anglers simply hate to troll and may never try the techniques described in this series of articles. However, trolling spoons for bass does have its advantages, and it's this angler's favorite method of striper fishing for many reasons. Not only is it proven to be a productive fishing method, but if one only has a few hours to fish, all they need to do is grab a couple of trolling rods, a few spoons, run right out to where the fishing has been hot and grab a few for dinner. After the initial setup of the rods, there is not much preparation, there is no running around catching or buying bait and subsequently, no lost time. What could be easier?

Editor's Note: Captain Rob Sabalowsky is a charter captain who has been striper fishing for over 50 years. Although some of his views are unconventional, his methods consistently catch trophy fish for his clients. Sabalowsky also owns a company called TGT Tackle, and produces some of the best trolling products on the market. Anglers can find these products in many local tackle shops, or on the web at www.tgttackle.com.

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