

World Record Muskie: FRAUD

By Travis Cunningham

In the record books at the Fresh Water Hall of Fame in Hayward, Wisconsin, Louis Spray is listed as the World Record Holder of the heaviest muskie ever caught. Spray is documented as catching a 69 pound 11 ounce muskie that was 63.5 inches long with a 31.25-inch girth. There are many people in the muskie-fishing world that dispute the validity of this record, myself included.

Fishing for muskellunge (*esox masquinongy*) is a unique sport. According to the 2006 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 30 million people fish in the United States every year (8). The number of anglers targeting muskies is poorly researched. Reports range from 70,000 to 400,00 anglers. It is safe to conclude however, that the percentage of anglers targeting muskies is relatively low.

One reason for the small group of anglers is that the muskie is one of the most difficult freshwater fish to consistently catch. The muskie has been commonly referred to as "The Fish of 10,000 Casts". This is of course an exaggeration, but compared to bass or walleye fishing, catch rates are very low. Success is not always measured by catching a muskie. Many consider seeing a fish as a victory. Quite often a muskie will be witnessed following behind a giant lure making its way back to an eager fisherman's rod.

Because of the immense challenge involved in angling for these top predators, muskie hunters take great pride in trophy catches. Proper credit is well

deserved when an angler achieves their goal. As read on esoxhunter.com, a popular method for determining the weight of a muskellunge is to plug its length and girth measurements into a formula called “The Crawford Formula”; weight in lbs=(length in inches X girth in inches)/ 25)-10. When you plug Spray’s 1949 muskie measurements into the formula the results are 69.38 pounds, pretty close to the record. This formula is considered pretty accurate, but not to be used for exact measurements.

Great passion and respect for the sport has driven a group of professional anglers to form the World Record Muskie Alliance or WRMA. Their mission is to “1) resolve the current controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the currently accepted record muskellunge; (2) establish proper controls and record keeping agencies to ensure the legitimacy of all future record muskellunge; (3) library and disseminate scientific data regarding world record muskellunge catches” (WRMA mission statement). They have submitted a 94-page report to the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame proving that the record is false.

One of the first points made in the 2005 WRMA Louie Spray Summary, was to compare how the actual skin mount of the 1949 muskie greatly differed from the actual size of the fish suggesting that the mount was altered to be larger than the fish actually was. They WRMA hired Dan Mills of DCM Technical Services, Inc. to conduct a photogrammetric evaluation on the 1949 fish. As seen in figure 9, the results were that the skin mount was 14 percent longer and the girth was 8 percent larger than the fresh fish (13). The evaluation was subjected to a peer review and accepted as legitimate and properly conducted.

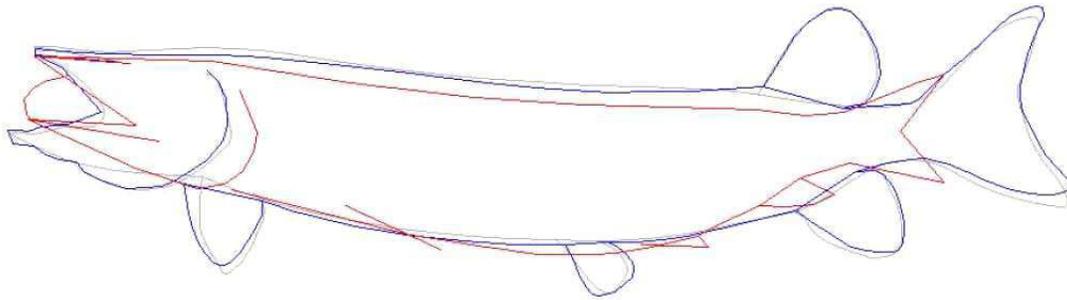


Figure 9 - 1949 skin mount Muskie photogrammetric solution.

Doug Petrousek, one of the most accredited taxidermists in the United States, analyzed the skin mount compared to the fresh fish pictures. He concluded, “ I found this fish to be distorted in such manner to lead me to believe it was intentional and not just an “accident” of the taxidermist’s art. I believe these fish to be artificially enlarged in order to conform to a predetermined size, which these fish did not measure up to when caught (2). In the WRMA Synopsis he also stated, “The thin girth and the rearward position of the fins are consistent with an attempt to stretch the skin onto a form, making the mount measure longer than the fish actually was” (11).

In 2004 the WRMA conducted an experiment creating cardboard silhouettes matching the claimed dimensions of the 1949 Spray fish. They took some pictures recreating the photo of Spray holding the 69-pound record fish. The person holding the silhouette was six feet tall. Louis Spray was 5’ 11” tall. The WRMA members were amazed at the results of such a simple experiment. The cardboard cutout was much larger than Spray’s 1949 fish (8).

If the scientific evidence is not enough to sway one's opinion on this world record farce, some insight into his character might. In the book *Three Muskies in His Day*, John Detloff describes Spray as catching "...not a single muskie from 1935 to the middle of 1938" (150). That is quite a drought for a fisherman of Spray's supposed expertise. According to the WRMA synopsis he suddenly caught a miraculous string of giant fish, beginning August 12, 1938 with his 38 pound 4 ounce Fitger Brewing contest winner. His friend Widmer Smith was witness and fishing partner for that catch. Interestingly, in the same year Smith had entered a first place muskie into the Field & Stream annual fishing contest. A few years later Smith admitted that he had shot the fish from a bridge, and padded the weight of the fish. Smith claimed Spray as witness to the fish. The two would later be partnered when Spray caught the 1939 world record muskie also (12). It seems both sought personal gain by falsifying the sizes of their catches. People are more likely to hire guides who have demonstrated superior skill catching giant fish.

In 1939 Spray allegedly caught a world record fish weighing 59 pounds eight ounces. The fish had a large hole in the side of it. His explanation was that he grabbed one of the handguns he had with him and shot the fish after a relatively short ten-minute struggle with the beast (14). It seems very suspicious that his good friend admitted to shooting one of his contest entries with a rifle, and now Spray's world record comes in with a bullet hole also. If it were known that he took the fish by shooting alone, his record would be revoked.

In Detloff's book the caption under a photo reads, "Louie holding a muskie

that he caught out of Blaisdell Lake in 1939, which reportedly tipped the scale at 41 ½ pounds” (153). This photo also appears in Spray’s book, *My Muskie Days*, with the caption, “Lou Spray with a 24 pounder, 1924” (7). It is clear to anyone who fishes for muskies that the fish appears to weigh closer to the 24 pound mark. It is also obvious that Spray has a difficult time keeping his stories straight. As noted in the WRMA synopsis, he even mislabeled the postcards he had made of his world-class achievement. He mistakenly labeled his 1940 record fish as the 1949 record fish. He made the same mistake on a collage created for self-promotion (13).

The taxidermist Karl Kahmann mounted Spray’s first two world record fish, but refused to mount the third. In a letter to the American Museum of Natural History he wrote, “I cannot see how you can do more than to rely upon affidavits and scaler’s record stubs, but these do not show whether the specimen was “filled before weighing’.” (1). This letter suggests what many believed true, that numerous big fish from that time period were being artificially weighted to deceive witnesses. In fact, pictures of Spray’s 1940 world record have some suspicious bumps consistent with “filling” the fish. It is easy for me to believe that Louis Spray would try to lie and cheat his way into the record books.

The Hall of Fame itself seems to be biased towards Spray’s record. In January of 2006, the Hall announced their decision to uphold the Spray record (Rebuttal to Hall Decision, p2). I think it is important to notice that the Hall Executive Board President is John Detloff, the author of the previously mentioned book, *Three Muskies in His Day*. The decision to uphold Spray’s record was

decided in part by Detloff. He may be afraid to look foolish for overturning something that he was a part in promoting. In my opinion, it makes him look like a fraud and reduces the Hall's credibility by choosing to ignore obvious evidence.

In 1992 the Hall disqualified Art Lawton's 69 pound 15 ounce world record, based on similar circumstances that the WRMA brought to the Hall's attention about Spray's record. In Spray's case, the Hall required their own experts to come in and analyze the 1949 photographs. When Lawton's record was disputed, the Hall trusted an amateur analysis to be accurate and enough to justify disqualification (2). In fact, the Hall chose to ignore the results of the photographic study they requested, performed by, Director of the University of Minnesota's Institute for Mathematics and its Application, Professor Douglas Arnold (4). Arnold stated, "In particular, my conclusion, that the fish is certainly shorter than 63 inches and perhaps considerably so is consistent with the DCM statement that the length is 53.6 inches plus or minus 1.5 inches." (4).

According to a 2006 press release from the WRMA, in 1992 John Detloff stated the following, "Some individuals have made the petty, and unfounded accusations that the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame disqualified the Lawton Muskie in an effort to 'bring the record back home to Wisconsin'. But to anyone knowing the facts, this easily can be dispelled. The fact is, the decision to disqualify Lawton's fish was not made by a handful of "Hayward people," but by a world board of approximately 40 Advisory Governors made up of people from all over the United States, Canada and even abroad."(2). In July of 2005, the WRMA received a letter from the Hall stating, "The decision to reject or concur

with a protest rests solely with the combined vote of the full Executive Board of Directors and the Executive Director.” (2). Now that an area celebrity is put on the block, the Hall changes its position and lets a “handful of Hayward people”- eight actually, to decide the fate of the record (2). The fact their hometown hero, Spray, holds one of the most high profile freshwater fishing records, would only add to the draw of tourists to visit and spend money in their tourist-driven economy.

Sadly, the manner in which the hall blatantly ignored all common sense and obvious evidence caused two prominent Hall members to resign. Larry Ramsell and Brad Latvaitis donated a combined 65 years of volunteer service to the Hall. Both felt that the Hall was extremely biased (2). They seemed almost embarrassed to be associated with an organization that would act the way the Hall did.

These actions cannot result in good publicity for the Hall. If they do not overturn the 1949 world record held by Louis Spray for heaviest muskie, they will lose credibility, and in turn, all records at the Hall risk losing real meaning among serious fisherman. Their stubbornness could lead to the record books possibly having to be re-written by a more trustworthy organization. I truly hope our great fishing history will not be tarnished forever by this foolish standoff.

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