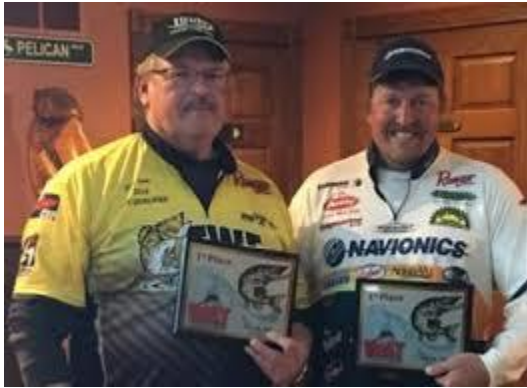


BUSINESS, PLEASURE A WINNING FORMULA FOR SKARLIS, LAHR



By Doug Newhoff

W.A.T. Media Director

GENOA, Wis. -- Tommy Skarlis and Jeff Lahr don't always see eye to eye. For Skarlis, fishing is business. For Lahr, it's more about pleasure. But while their perspectives may differ, Skarlis and Lahr share plenty of common ground that has helped them become one of the top teams on the Walleye Anglers Trail.

"Tommy is his own worst critic," notes Lahr, who has been Skarlis' tournament partner for the past seven seasons. "Even when we have a good bag, he's always analyzing what we could have done to get one more bite or trying to think of a way we could have done it better. His philosophy is to not waste a second and to make every move count.

"Me, I just try to put it in my log and my memory bank so I remember and can use it again."

Skarlis has built a hall of fame career as a professional fisherman. He's a Professional Walleye Trail, FLW Tour, Anglers Insight Marketing, Full Throttle, Masters Walleye Circuit, Walleye Anglers Trail and Crappie Masters champion. "It's his profession," says Lahr. "It's how he feeds his family. But like I tell him all the time, this is not my job. If it's not going to be fun, I'm not going to do it. Don't get me wrong, we're out there to win. We're not out there to be second, but I'm out there to have a good time."

The good times have been rolling lately for Skarlis and Lahr, who in one of their first events as a team dominated a 2010 Full Throttle event at Red Wing, Minn., with a record five-fish limit of 41.63 pounds. More recently, they won the April 2

W.A.T. tournament at Genoa, Wis., for their second victory on the circuit (they also won at Genoa in 2015) to go with two seconds and two thirds. They were the 2015 W.A.T. Team of the Year.

Their most recent triumph was both rewarding and remarkable.

On Nov. 6, Skarlis fell from a tree stand while deer hunting in Northeast Iowa. He suffered multiple fractures in his neck and was airlifted to La Crosse, Wis., where he underwent fusion surgery that included the insertion of plates to stabilize the fractures in his neck.

His rehab has been extensive, excruciating and exhausting. It's also ongoing, but a little more than four months after the accident, he and Lahr were in the boat for the W.A.T. season-opener at Spring Valley, Illinois.

A couple of weeks after that, Skarlis returned to Grenada, Miss., for another Crappie Masters event where he and Mike Baker placed 10th. And April 2, Skarlis and Lahr joined forces to run away with that W.A.T. qualifier on Pool 9 of the Mississippi River where their 27.39-pound catch nearly doubled that of the second-place team.

"The doctors said there was no medical explanation for why I didn't end up paralyzed from the neck down," says Skarlis, who continues to deal with some nerve damage and limited flexibility. "I thank God every day."

Although there was plenty of doubt whether Skarlis would be part of the tournament scene this season, he has been driven to return to doing what he loves.

"There are still days when I wonder how much further I will be able to progress," he notes. "I think the No. 1 thing that has driven my rehab is my faith. Number two, it's how I make my living, and I love doing it. I don't want to get a regular job. I'm going to dig, scratch, claw, lift weights or do whatever I've got to do to get back to being a spry 51-year-old."

"There's a reason I'm still alive and a reason I'm still fishing and a reason I'm able to do what I'm doing," Skarlis continues. "I want to be an inspiration to other people to get off the couch and get out and experience and enjoy the outdoors."

Like many anglers on the Walleye Anglers Trail, fishing in general and then the Mississippi River were important parts of growing up for both Skarlis and Lahr.

"My mom took me fishing when I was 3. I fell in love with it," recalls Skarlis.

"Mom was always pushing to get me off the couch and get me outside. Dad, he didn't mind helping me out with the equipment I needed for hunting and fishing and gas for the truck.

"I was fishing off the float at Genoa before I had a driver's license," Skarlis continues. "We had a neighbor across the street named Hans Torgler who would drive Dennis Allison and me up to the river, drop us off and then come back and

pick us up at the end of the fishing day."

Nothing against the family's home improvement business, but Skarlis had a different career dream.

"I vowed back when I was young and fished off that float that someday I'd have a boat and I'd become a tournament fisherman," he says. "Like professional football or basketball or baseball players inspire kids to get into those sports, the rising pros in bass and then walleye fishing inspired me to think that someday maybe I could be a professional fisherman."

Lahr's late father got him hooked on fishing.

"He would take us kids camping on the sandbars," he recalls. "We didn't have enough money to stay in motels, but we had a boat so we would fish and ski. Dad was a big crappie fisherman, so we hung out in the backwaters a lot.

"I grew up fishing walleyes on the Shell Rock River, wading out and pitching hair jigs. I learned just watching the old boys out there and I did what they did."

Eventually, Lahr joined the Mississippi Walleye Club in Dubuque and learned the finer points of rigging and fishing Rapalas, which has been a key addition to his angling arsenal and his success.

More importantly, it's another technique he enjoys.

"At the end of the day, it's all about that feel-good sense of accomplishment that you were able to go out and compete," he notes. "I don't have to win them all. I can just have a good day and still feel good about that."

Regardless of their individual motivation, Skarlis and Lahr make a formidable team.

"What makes us a good team? Probably our ability to get along and work through our disagreements and come to agreement on how we're going to do things," Skarlis explains. "More important, I think it's both of our skill levels. Even if one of us is off, the other one usually seems to be on and we're able to catch some fish."