

OYEN, KOPP A FORMIDABLE DUO



By Doug Newhoff

W.A.T. Media Director

DUBUQUE -- Kevin Oyen and Steve Kopp enjoy helping people catch fish.

They also enjoy catching just a few more fish than everyone else, and that competitive drive and their years of experience on the Mississippi River are two of the reasons the Dubuque anglers are consistently near the top of the leaderboard on the Walleye Anglers Trail and other circuits around the Midwest.

Fishing, and especially walleye fishing, is both business and pleasure for Oyen and Kopp. As the owner of the W.A.T. since 2002, it's good business for Oyen when his tournament anglers catch fish. As a licensed guide, every day on the water adds to the base of information Kopp uses to put his clients on fish.

Like most of the W.A.T.'s anglers, Oyen and Kopp found their passion for fishing at an early age.

"When I was a little boy, my grandmother would sneak me out of school every spring and every fall to go fishing," Oyen relates. "My grandmother and grandfather fished all the time. Then when my grandfather got real sick, grandma would take me out all the time.

"My mom liked to fish, too, but she got too busy with all the other kids, so I'd stay with grandma in the summer and she'd take me fishing. We fished around Dickeyville (Wis.) and we'd go to the Pecatonica River by Mineral Point, too. We did a lot of bullhead fishing and we'd catch carp and that was fine, too. I just liked fishing."

Kopp also grew up in a fishing family.

"My dad really got me interested in it," he explains. "He used to take us up to Long Lake in Minnesota every year. We'd rent cabins up there and my grandpa would go, my mom ... We just loved it. My dad also liked to ice fish and he'd get us on a pile of fish in the backwaters of the Mississippi. I got hooked on that, too."

Both anglers credit the Mississippi Walleye Club for stoking their competitive fire.

"John Marshall told me about the Mississippi Walleye Club, so I joined," says Oyen, who served a term as the club's president and eventually teamed up with Marshall on the circuit. They won the 2007 W.A.T. event at Bellevue.

Kopp dabbled in bass fishing tournaments briefly before Oyen introduced him to the Mississippi Walleye Club. Since then, he has teamed up with Tim Ware, then Tom Millenkamp, then his wife, Jan.

Kopp and Millenkamp won Team of the Year honors once, and Steve and Jan did it again in 2007. The Koppes also had two runner-up finishes and two thirds in W.A.T. events together.

For the past eight years, it's been Oyen and Kopp. They were the 2012 W.A.T. winners at Genoa and consistently put themselves in position to cash a check. They've also enjoyed plenty of success beyond the W.A.T. with strong showings on the Masters Walleye Circuit, Cabela's National Team Championship and Cabela's Walleye Tour.

Kopp says he and Oyen complement each other well in the boat.

"One thing is that we get along good in the boat," he notes. "Kevin doesn't get too worked up about anything. As far as the fishing, Kevin is a really good rigger on the winddams where I'm probably a little more into the trolling. We do complement each other that way."

Meanwhile, the W.A.T. will always have a special place in Oyen's heart. The business of running a tournament circuit is a growing financial challenge, but the rewards keep Oyen committed and looking for new ways to grow interest. He knows that once anglers give the W.A.T. a chance, they'll find a lot to like.

"I like the people, number one," says Oyen. "The camaraderie is special. Then, it's a constant learning experience. There's always something new with a different technique or a different presentation. It's fun to watch these guys and see what they come up with.

"At my age now, it's fun to see these younger guys and gals get into fishing and develop an interest in it. The older guys in the W.A.T. are all very skilled river fishermen, but what I like is that they are helpful, too, with the young guys."

Since the initiation of a slot limit on the lower pools of the Mississippi and the W.A.T.'s change to a catch-record-release format, anglers are putting some big weights on the board and that excites Oyen, as well.

"Ever since they put that slot in, it's been fun," he says. "The fishing on our pool in Dubuque and on down the river is as good as I've ever seen it. Then with the CRR format, it's been nice not having to search for 15-19 inch fish when you've been on 24s and 25s all day. Now you can weigh those fish."