



Brian Ruh and the author smile over Brian's 55-inch summer musky caught on a Pounder.

Just like any other lure, soft plastics need to be tuned right to get the most from them

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

While tuning crankbaits and jerkbaits are common topics for discussion among musky fishermen, one thing that we don't ever talk about is how to properly tune our soft plastic baits. Plastics, which have only a flexible internal wire harness to give them rigidity, frequently get out of tune and need constant attention to make sure that the bait is running the way it is designed. They are among the highest maintenance baits on the market.

The demand for rubber musky lures is as high as it has ever been with baits like BullDawgs and Medussas finding their way into nearly every fisherman's boat. By understanding how these baits are supposed to run and knowing how to properly tune them you will ensure they catch as many fish as possible.

Rubber baits are designed to run straight through the water just like a crankbait. What this means is that you fish these lures with the typical pull-and-pause retrieve, pulling the bait with the rod tip and then reeling up the slack line while the lure falls in the water column. Every time you pull the bait you want it to go straight through the water and not hook left or right, or roll.

Tuning Rubber

If the bait's harness is straight inside the bait, then the bait should pull straight in the water as long as its body is perfectly straight. If the harness is a little crooked then you will probably have to bend the bait slightly the opposite way to offset the flaw in the harness.

The best way to tune rubber baits is to pitch them out parallel to the boat, maybe 15 feet, then use your pull-and-pause retrieve like you would on your cast. While you watch the bait, make sure that it is pulling straight through the water and not going off to either side.

Do not simply pitch the bait out and then straight-reel it in to see if it comes through the water straight. When you do that you are not truly testing the bait at all — often a bait that is extremely out of tune will come through the water straight when reeled in slowly. Think of that as checking a crankbait to see if it's running true at 3 mph when you actually plan to troll it at 5 mph. It is the speed and snap of the jerks, just like on your retrieve, that will truly tell you if the lure is in tune.

Tuning a rubber bait is just like tuning a crankbait, but rather than tweaking the eye of the lure you are bending the bait's body. Bend the lure opposite of the way it's running out of tune. If the bait is hooking to the left in the water, bend the harness to the right and vice versa. Often only small adjustments are needed to make the correction. In addition to tuning the bait right and left you often need to twist the bait to prevent it from rolling in the water. Normally this will be most obvious at the end of your pull when the bait is falling in the

Your Rubber

water. If at that point the lure is not falling right side up and is rolling over, you will need to twist the bait back to get it straight. Just like all tuning, you want to bend the bait opposite of the way it is running — if it is rolling counter-clockwise, then you want to bend the bait clockwise, and vice versa.

You can also control the running depth by tuning the bait. If you want your bait to run high in the water column simply bend the end of the bait upward (see photos, Page 60). If you want it to run deeper then bend the head of the bait downward. Since you are normally fishing rubber in deeper water you will usually want the bait bent down to increase running depth.

Fouled Baits

The two main things that are going to knock rubber baits out of tune are hooking a fish and “Dawgballs” — when the lure fouls on itself during a cast. Whenever a musky hits a bait it will bend the lure in some way, so after releasing or losing the fish always check the bait to make sure it is running correctly.

When you cast rubber lures and the leader or line hooks on the back hook of the bait (creating a Dawgball), you will need to pull it sideways back to the boat. This creates lots of resistance which will usually bend the bait. This bend is often made worse when an angler sets the hook in the belief the added weight of the lure pulling sideways in the water is a fish. Either way, every time this happens you need to make sure that the lure is still tracking true in the water.

Lastly, if your leader ever hooks the back of the bait mid retrieve it is a sign that your bait is not running correctly. As mentioned previously, when these baits are running correctly the leader should never hook up on the lure. However, if the bait is running to one side, it may turn 90 degrees or even 180

degrees in the water which will then allow the leader to hook the bait. If this happens the bait needs work.

Staying In Tune

There are a couple of ways to make sure your rubber baits are always running correctly. First, rip your bait all the way up to the boat as opposed to just straight reeling the last 10 or 15 feet. This more or less allows you to check how the bait is running during every cast.

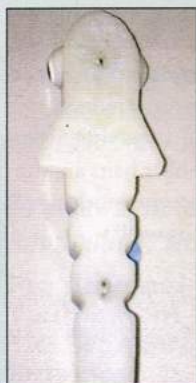
Next, I recommend hopping your bait around in the figure-8 or oval at the side of the boat rather than just moving it straight like a bucktail. Not only will this increase your bite rate at the boat, but it allows you to detect any flaws in the way the bait is running.

Additionally, when casting any rubber lures, make sure that at the end of your backswing you let the bait hang for a split second extra before powering through the cast. By doing this, as well as thumbing the spool a bit while the bait is in the air, you will minimize bait tangles. This technique prevents the bait from tumbling end over end in the air and allows it to fly straight, with the tail pointing away and the head of the lure toward the angler. It is easy to get angry when the bait balls up in mid air because of the wasted cast, but this problem is 100 percent the fault of the angler.

Loading up the rod and putting a lot of power into your cast will dramatically reduce the frequency of this problem. Keep in mind that as your body fatigues you will start seeing a breakdown in your casting form. When this happens, pay specific attention to what you are doing to make up for the fatigue in your shoulders and back from a day of casting rubber.

Rubber Repair

Always fix any cut or slice in the bait that will make it less



This BullDawg has a straight hook harness.



Note how the harness of this BullDawg is twisted.



This bait is bent left and will run to the bait's left.



This bait is bent right and will run to the bait's right.



This bait is twisted, will run to the bait's right and roll over.



This bait is twisted, will run to the bait's left and roll over.

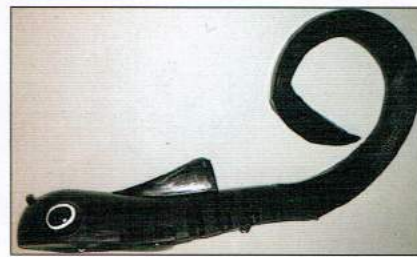
Tune Your Rubber

symmetrical. Anytime the lure has a large cut (normally from a fish), the slice will open on the pull and drag, thus throwing off the flow of water over it. For that reason I recommend carrying a blow torch and butter knife, or a bottle of Mend-it glue, to fix all slices in the bait immediately to ensure it is running correctly.

The last way to ensure that you have the best success with rubber baits is to



With its harness bent downward, this BullDawg will run deeper.



With its harness bent upward, this BullDawg will run shallower.

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throw them away and get new ones after they have seen several fish. They are expensive, but notice how it becomes harder to retune a bait after it gets eaten or bent from casting. The main reason for this is that the bait has been bent so many times left and right that the harness actually has many small bends in it. Although the lure may look fine, the small bends combine to make it difficult to get the lure running straight. A lot of retuning will waste precious fishing time.

As a general rule, as soon as a lure has spent more than 30 to 50 hours in the water or has been hit three to six times, I start to keep track of how much time I spend tuning it. When I think I am spending more than twice as much time tuning an old lure than a new one, I retire the lure and move on to another. Keep in mind that this is simply my breaking point and my rule of thumb. You will have some baits that run perfectly after 10 fish and others which are a nightmare from the moment you pull them out. Simply keep track of the time you spend trying to tune the lures to ensure you waste as little time as possible.

Throughout the season we all spend hundreds of hours making sure that our boat, rods, reels, hooks and line are up to par, but if your baits are not running correctly all of that other preparedness will be in vain. By constantly paying attention to the way your rubber baits are running you will ensure that the muskies will pay attention to them as well!

For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com

