

SPORTS BLOGS

USA Ice Team wins World Ice Fishing Championship

By *Paul A. Smith* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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Holding fast to its Day 1 lead, the USA Ice Team surprised a field of experienced international anglers and won the 2010 World Ice Fishing Championship in Rhinelander.

"We thought we'd be happy with something in the middle of the pack," said team captain Mike McNett of Lombard, Ill. "Tell me I'm not imagining it."

There it was, the crystal WIFC first place trophy, as brilliant as the ice of Boom Lake under a late winter sun and as solid as the congratulatory hugs of fellow competitors.

Murmurs of "USA, USA" rose from the standing room-only crowd in the Hodag Park weigh-in tent as the result became apparent.

The U.S. finished first, with 39 points in the International Angling Confederation scoring system. Points are determined by weight of fish caught and the order in which anglers finish in the five daily fishing sections. Competition took place from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday and Sunday on Boom Lake, a flowage on the Wisconsin River.

Poland finished second (54 points) and Latvia took third (56).

In order, the rest of the finishers were: Russia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Ukraine and Canada.

The good news didn't end there for the Americans: Mike Boedeker of Lansing, Mich. took the individual gold medal. He caught 2.630 kilograms of fish and finished first in his Saturday section and third on Sunday; Folke Andersson of Sweden took the silver medal.

Results were still being sorted out Sunday afternoon to determine the individual bronze medalist.

The U.S. team had a distinct Midwestern accent, including several Wisconsinites. In addition to Boedeker, the American anglers were: Doug Bussian, Columbus, Wis.; Tony Boshold, Carol Stream, Ill.; Billy Whiteside, Eau Claire, Wis.; Myron Gilbert, Brooklyn, Mich; and Bob Esbenson, Palatine, Ill.

The team also included coach Greg Wilcznski of Pleasant Prairie, Wis., team captain Mike McNett of Lombard, Ill., International Delegate Joel McDearmon of Tomah, Wis. and directors Chris Ward of Chaska, Minn. and Brian Gaber of Rhinelander, Wis.

The home ice advantage clearly helped the U.S. team. The European ice anglers are accustomed to catching more but smaller fish such as roaches and bream.

And since ground baiting (the practice of spreading bread crumbs or other food to attract fish) was disallowed by the international judges for the 2010 event, the competitors had to rely only on baited hooks.

In addition, Gaber of Rhinelander, a director of the U.S. squad, had spent hundreds of hours mapping the waters of Boom Lake and scouting in advance of the event.

But this was only the second time the U.S. had entered a team in the competition. Last year, at the WIFC in Poland, the American finished last.

In the annals of international upsets on the ice, it's not likely to be mentioned in the same breath as the U.S. hockey team taking gold at

the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid.

But nobody expected this.

"They did what they're good at, catching panfish in highly pressured water under very tough conditions," said WIFC official Lee Young of Green Bay. "Hats off to them."

Competitors weighed mostly bluegill and crappie and some yellow perch. Game fish were disallowed.

Rules also prohibited power augers and fish finders, underwater cameras or electronics of any kind.

Most catches were made on tiny ice jigs tipped with wax worms or spikes. Although most European anglers fished tight to the bottom, Boedeker said he and his U.S. teammates did well by fishing for suspended fish.

Young said it was the first world championship in any angling discipline for an American team.

"I also think its unprecedented in international competition to go from zeros to heros in just the span of one year," said Young, an angler with over 25 years of international experience.

It was enough to make the Godfather cry.

"I don't know if I could be any prouder," said a teary-eyed Dave Genz of St. Cloud, Minn., widely known as the Godfather of modern ice fishing and official ambassador at the WIFC.

The fishing conditions were described as "tough," especially Sunday as high pressure and sunny skies moved in.

The entire U.S. team, including Doug Bussian of Columbus, Wis. and Bill Whiteside of Eau Claire., turned in impressive performances both days. Bussian placed third in his section Saturday and second Sunday.

Whiteside placed second Sunday in Sector A.

The atmosphere in the weigh-in tent remained tense as the first three sections were announced. But when Bussian weighed 1.385 kilograms of fish and placed second, the U.S. team members started to believe a win was possible.

And when Boedeker, the anchor, weighed 1.495 kilograms and took third in Sector E, the final result was assured.

The cramped tent became a sea of hugging parkas as USA Ice Team and several other squads, including Poland, erupted in spontaneous emotion.

The WIFC awards no monetary prizes, only team trophies and individual medals. That's not to mention honor, respect and a few other things anglers know well.

"Bragging rights for the whole year over some of the best anglers on the planet," said Bussian, a tournament-proven angler who nevertheless carried a penny he found on the ice opening day. "That's going to feel good."

The photos below show (from top to bottom): Doug Bussian of Columbus, Wis, reeling in a bluegill on Boom Lake Sunday at the WIFC; Bussian (in blue jacket) being hugged by members of the Poland team after results were announced Sunday; and individual gold medalist Mike Boedeker of Lansing, Mich. (right) and silver medalist Folke Andersson of Sweden. Photos by Paul A. Smith





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