

# HOW ICE TEAM CHANGED ICE FISHING



While Dave Genz is the undisputed father of modern ice fishing, it was the original ice fishing tournament series started in the 1980s called Trap Attacks, followed by the inception of Ice Team in the mid 1990s that kicked the new ice fishing era into overdrive.

The new approach, introduced primarily by Genz, offered new perspectives on lures, rod setup, mobility, clothing, transportation and technology. The Ice Team members not only adopted these new strategies, but worked to improve the techniques.

Ice Team started as a vision on a napkin and has evolved into the World's largest ice fishing club. Along the way, Ice Team anglers formed friendships, shared best-practices, shared and learned lessons together in the spirit of camaraderie — and a bit of competition.

It's still changing. Long-time ice anglers have experienced history and will be witness to more as Ice Team continues to improve the ice fishing experience. A look into the past reveals how far ice fishing has come in 30 years.

## Mobility

Ice Team anglers heard the message loud and clear in the early 1980s when Genz began stressing the importance of mobility in putting more fish on the ice. Teams took the philosophy and pushed the envelope beyond expectations in the Trap Attacks tournaments. The popularity of the single-seat, one-person Fish Trap shelters exploded and when conditions were favorable, the anglers stepped outside the shacks cutting fresh holes at a rapid pace. One fisherman would drill, while the other came behind checking the holes for fresh fish with their Vexilar's. They moved so fast, that they were being compared to fishing on the big water while pulling planer boards.

## Fish Houses

The single-seat Fish Trap was first sewn together by Genz's wife, Patsy, back in 1979. Then came the ice fishing-related company USL that eventually evolved into the Clam Corp. we know today. When Ice Team hit the ice for a Trap Attack, we turned snow-covered lakes into blue villages on the hardwater. Sold out Trap Attacks in Wisconsin and Michigan put 300 anglers on each lake and most were equipped with either a Fish Trap Pro or Scout. These single-seat coupes were lightweight and allowed the anglers to move with the bite at a moment's notice. They were invaluable on a clear water bite where sight fishing methods ruled at the weigh-ins.

## Clothing

The inception of the original blue Ice Armor fishing suit in 2004 really added to the mobility of the ice angler. I remember Genz saying that it was like wearing your own personal Fish Trap on your back. At the tourneys, we'd see hundreds of anglers wearing their blue fishing suits. New suits were developed and added to the Ice Armor lineup, and spurred other companies into the market place. Vexilar introduced the Cold Snap parka and bibs line-up, my own favorite when the wind is howling and it is bitter cold out on the ice. Technology in outwear has advanced to the likes of the Clam Lift suit, which is

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new for this year. It adds to the buoyancy of the angler and provides flotation if one falls through the ice. Nobody wants to get wet, but safety is always the No. 1 priority when trekking across the hardwater.

## Electronics

At the start of the tourneys there was the FL-8 from Vexilar, it was the ultimate flasher back then. If someone forgot it back home, they would turn around and get it before continuing the fishing trip. The venerable 8 meant putting more fish on the ice, versus fishing blind.

Vexilar introduced the FL-18 in 2001 and anglers were able to fish close-up with the new zoom feature. The left half of the dial could now be dedicated to the bottom 6 feet of the water column. This meant that the separation between the fish and the bait could be clearly seen, and you knew when that fish was going to inhale the jig.

Competition broke out after the 18. Several companies jumped into the market and the race to improve was on. Some of the greatest advances in the medical surgical fields have been developed out of necessity during wartime. The same can be said for the battles that took place on the ice. Suggestions flowed in and equipment improved. Vexilar introduced the larger dials in the FL-20 and FL-22 HD series, expanded their zoom capabilities, and specialized in target separation.

For 2014, there will be no competition for the newly introduced Vexilar FLX-28. It features brushless technology, five color palettes for identifying fish, a self-draining sun cowl, a 20-step interference rejection system, plus all the attributes from previous models and much more, including a digital depth readout.

As important as the flashers are on the ice, another form of electronics made its way into the tournament scene: GPS.

Whenever the Trap Attacks would come into town, the crew from Clam and Dave Genz would come as well. I vividly remember Dave and some other anglers huddled around a table studying a paper map, deciding where on the lake to fish the next day. At first everyone had some type of handheld GPS, and they were great for saving a waypoint where you found the fish, but you still needed to dissect the lake back on the kitchen table for general direction. Then came handhelds that would take a SD card that contained lake contour data, anglers could really dial in a location while on the ice, but the screens were small. Anglers still needed to study a larger paper map to see the overall picture.

Paper maps left the equation when Ice Team anglers took their large-screen GPSes out of their boats and installed them on their ice machines. Five- to 9-inch screens meant anglers could not only cut up a lake while actually on the ice, but could take them into the cabin or hotel at

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night and study the updated charts. Perhaps the most convenient aspect of using the large screen was that while traveling from one waypoint to another, there was no longer need to stop the machine and get out the small-screen hand-held for direction.

Ice Team anglers put underwater cameras to use, and for more reasons than watching fish approach the jig. Cameras are a valuable tool when busting up a new lake and on scout missions. They make it easier to pinpoint drop-offs and weed edges, saving valuable pre-fishing time. A Vexilar flasher will let you know if there are weeds below the hole, but a camera such as Vexilar's Fish Scout 2000 DT, or the new smartphone device, you can now tell if they are green, or the decaying brown oxygen-sucking type.

Cameras have two more useful purposes to any angler. A flasher can indicate the presence of fish, but a camera will show the type of fish. It can save precious time if the target is bluegill and nothing but perch show up on the screen. Last of all, you still want that camera to let you see the fish approach your jig. An angler can be jigging away, marking lots of fish, but not finding any takers. In this type of situation, a camera will tell you why and you can adjust your approach. The jig might be spinning in circles turning the fish off — if so, bust out a new rod with a reel like the Genz Ice Spooler that doesn't produce line twist and solve the problem. In other instances the presentation is too big and necessitates a jig downsize or a bait change.

### Transportation

Snowmobiles, quads and other forms of transportation were around long before the inception of Ice Team. One of the first that I can remember to go beyond simply dragging a shanty or sled behind their machine was Genz. Genz installed a custom Fish Trap rack on the rear of his snowmobile and another rack on the front for his auger.

This created a cottage industry in every state to build custom racks for all types of machines. The anglers themselves took rigging their machines to the next level. Like any open water fisherman and their boats, they customized their “rides” to match their unique fishing styles. From auger mounts, storage, rod holders, and storage totes, they packed as much gear on the machines as possible.

### Jigs

When it comes to getting your bait down to where the fish are, nothing beats a jig. As Ice Team and the Trap Attacks gained steam lead jigs were the rule of thumb — until tungsten took it in the early 2000s. One could fish just as heavy as with lead heads, but with smaller sized jigs. This was a crucial achievement for the tourney angler because it became possible to target even the most reluctant fish and make it bite. A change in the weather pressure will make a fish tight-lipped. If 300 anglers drill more than 50 holes a day during pre-fishing, it has the same effect. By down-

sizing the jigs anglers could coax the shell-shocked fish into biting.

Tungsten also changed the way anglers targeted their quarry in heavy weed beds. Tungsten jigs would not stop in mid-drop, but could shoot through the vegetation and get the bait into the strike zone. Tungsten jigs improved results in deep water panfish bites, as well. Better results came from a smaller presentation in a 12 or 14 sized tungsten jig, versus the old size 8 or 10 lead jig.

### Flies

In Michigan many of the old timers referred to the small lead jigs as “ice flies.” What they didn't know, and the rest of the Ice Belt was about to find out, was the presentation used in the Brooklyn area of Michigan became known as the Michigan Rig in the mid-2000s. The rig consisted of a dry trout-sized fly that was attached to a leader coming off the main line with a jig below. Barry Williams, from the Brooklyn area, has really pushed the fly concept out into the open with his lineup of “Spooky Spiders.” Many took notice in the fall of 2012, where he was featured in an article based on the material he uses to tie his flies.

### Plastics

My first experience with plastics started when I was about six years old, rowing around my grandma's lake in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. We dug our own worms and would catch bluegill and perch all day long. When we ran out of bait, my Aunt Nancy would cut up balloons into strips for myself and my cousins and we fished with those with great success. When it came to ice fishing, artificial baits were on the shelves in stores before the two person teams started fishing the Trap Attacks in the mid-2000s. Almost every angler had some type of plastic bait in the arsenal. Unfortunately they were too stiff — even lifeless — and they were only used as a last resort when fisherman ran out of live bait.

It was during the mid-2000 tournaments that this philosophy began to change. Some of the teams discovered a small company in Wisconsin called Little Atom, and they made “soft plastics.” It was not long before a lot of teams were using the baits as their first option when dropping jigs down the hole. Soon the baits became discussed on the forums and started showing up on websites and in retail stores. The movement towards soft plastics inspired others to produce their own baits. At the weigh-ins we started to hear guys catching big fish and cashing checks with something called a Maki plastic.

Based in New York, Ice Team member and founder Scott Brauer incorporated a creature type presentation into his lineup for lures. These soft chewable baits mimicked the natural forage that bluegill, crappie and perch thrive on. It can be said that the Ice Team anglers drove the revolution in soft plastics, and through the Maki brand it continues to reach new heights.



## Reels

When talking about reels, the buzz on many forums in the early 1990s was all about which spinning reel was the best when it came to ice fishing. Meanwhile in the Trap Attack tourney teams from Michigan were earning championship rings and team-of-the-year honors. They were using a lightweight plastic reel that reduced line twist. Known for the brand's name, the Schooley's did not create the line twist associated with spinning reels. Twisted line will cause a jig to spin and often turn off interested panfish. The gaining popularity of the reel drove companies to create a better mouse trap. Some were awkward and others too heavy when matched with an ice fishing ultra-light rod.

Clam got it right last year when they introduced the Genz Ice Spooler reel. The improvements on the reel were many while keeping with the retrieve that did not create the dreaded line twist. Much like a fly reel, but significantly lighter in weight, they designed the reel with ergonomics in mind. Like a spinning reel, the Ice Spoolers drop down from the rod and makes it easier for anglers to reel in their prize. A drag system that was incorporated into the reel, allowing better hook sets and the process of fighting the fish smoother. That is key when using the lightweight lines employed in ice fishing.

## Rods

Rods have changed very little over the years, and although many fine products exist, their beauty truly lies with the beholder. Anglers find qualities in a rod that they value, and the smart ones apply different attributes to various situations. Although Ice Team anglers had very little to do with the advancement of the rod industry, we changed how rods were used.

It started with bringing multiples of the same rods out onto the ice: it was better than wasting time constantly tying new jigs onto our lines. Lose a jig or have the bite slow down, it was as easy as grabbing a new rod and getting back into the game, saving precious minutes. This concept evolved further with some influence from, of all things, bass fishing.

In bass fishing, anglers use rods in a variety of sizes and actions to fish for one species. The rods are designed to handle different depths and lake environments. A sight fishing rod (call it the flipping stick of the ice fishing world) is stiffer than most panfish rods. It's specially designed with a short blank to jerk fish up when they inhale the bait. Even though most on the outside think all spring bobbbers are the same, to paraphrase, there are springs, and then there are springs. Some springs are best for finessing: made of very light wire, they detect the slightest of bites. Other springs, while better in detecting bites than most blanks, are a bit stiffer

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than the finesse springs. These springs give your bait a swimming action that cannot be replicated by any other method or material.

## Line

When many of us joined Ice Team, line options were limited by today's standards. In the 1990s, the options were grey and some form of the color blue. Before the widespread popularity of Vexilar's three-color flasher in the pre-Ice Team era, hardcore fisherman employed a tactic known as tightlining. The key to this method required a high-visibility line that helped the anglers detect the lightest of bites.

Even though the use of electronics no longer makes this a primary tactic, anglers would be silly not to incorporate the method into their own approach. The word got out, demand grew and the line-producing companies listened. It wasn't long before they offered monofilament and braided “hi-vis” lines in yellow, gold, white and neon greens. There were still some skeptics who thought the bright line would scare fish away. That worry vanished with the introduction of fluorocarbon in about 2004, and using it as a leader between the bright line and jig.

From local concepts to introducing new tech, the teams who participated in the Trap Attacks left their marks on the lakes they fished. They spurred an industry into producing better products. Even today, the competition off the ice continues to make the competitors on the ice even better than they were the year before. And it all started with an idea for a mobile shanty, anglers participating in the Trap Attacks and the formation of the Ice Team. 