Share the sporting tradition as hot competition hits the ice.

Northern Illinois Conservation Club 50th Anniversary

Story By Frank Jakubicek
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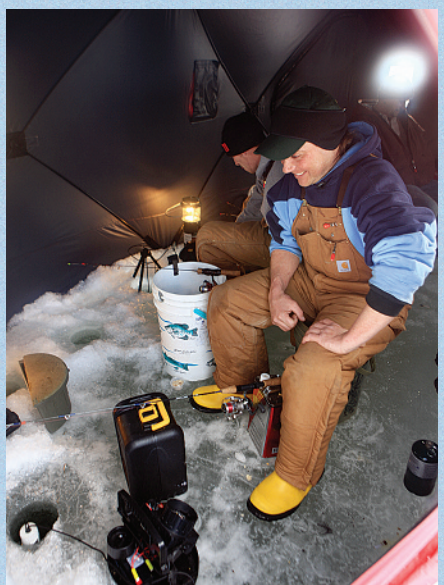
Ice fishing throughout most of Illinois is, at best, a part-time hobby. However, in northeastern Illinois, where freeze-up historically occurs around December 6 and fishable ice often continues through mid February, fishermen are a little more serious about their sport.

For 49 continuous years, those cold weather conditions have been successfully exploited by one non-profit sportsman's group, the Northern Illinois Conservation Club. On Feb. 13-14, a thousand or so ice fishermen will converge on the Fox Chain O' Lakes for the 50th anniversary NICC Ice Fishing Derby, vying for hourly catch and raffle prizes, and exchanging information about how and where the fish might be biting.

Derby headquarters is the Thirsty Turtle, a resort located on the southwestern side of Channel Lake west of Antioch, where derby participants register and join in on the fun. Newcomers are always welcome.



In the ranks of ice fishing enthusiasts present are seasoned veterans who've fished this event for decades as well as second- and third-generation neophytes. Regardless of their level of experience or success, part of the fun of fishing in an organized event is that at the end of the day even some of those less-lucky anglers walk away a winner—maybe with a new trolling motor, rod and reel, dinner for two or even Cubs tickets.

I stopped by two local businesses, which I knew have been around a

The well-equipped ice fisherman brings along a portable shanty to shut out the cold wind of winter. With proper boots, ice anglers can fish all day in comfort—while secretly catching fish the competition can't see.

Fresh fish taste best when stored on ice, and nothing tastes better than ice-caught bluegill. For long treks across the lake, smart anglers load their gear on snow sleds.

while, to gain some insight into the NICC Derby. Both stops held surprises.

At Triangle Sport and Marine, on the corner of Route 83 and Grass Lake Road, owner Greg Dickson explained how long he's been a sponsor of the NICC Derby: "I remember fishing in that when I was 7. My Dad started the business 62 years ago and we've donated to the derby ever since it started. It's just one of those things that happens every year."

A couple of the customers in Triangle Bait were long-time participants as well, and freely offered insight into some of their experiences, such as the derbies when the only way onto the ice was across a 6- or 8-foot plank because warm weather had melted the ice away from shore.

Over a span of 50 years, a range of circumstances is bound to happen, and organizers either cancel or overcome the problem. NICC always overcomes the problems.

Throughout the Antioch area, anglers tell stories about how crazy the weather can be in mid February, but their bottom line remains unchallenged: I always try to make the NICC derby. We find a way to catch fish. Somebody won some nice prizes.

At Sorenson's Bait, west of Antioch on Route 173, I had the pleasure of speaking with owner Ed Sorenson, a 95-year-young man who was, in 1960, a founding member Northern Illinois Conservation Club. He's a spry, busy man with a wealth of information regarding the history of area lakes and the Fox Chain O' Lakes. If someone had to be an expert, Sorenson wins. After all he's been in business for 77 years.

The Feb. 13-14, 2010 NICC derby will take place Sat. 8 a.m.-4 p.m., Sun. 7 a.m.-2 p.m. The main headquarters is the Thirsty Turtle on Channel Lake, where club representatives will check-in ice-fishermen, hold hourly prize drawings and record biggest and smallest catches from 10 categories of fish. Games, food and beverages will be available.

With more than 100 sponsors and donors, prizes are as abundant as baitfish.

Additional information on NICC is available at www.lakeonline.com/nicc.

His bait shop is old school—live bait and the basics—and he leaves the gimmicks to the big-box stores. Sorenson knows bait. He's a minnow man by profession and speaks volumes on when and where he and his friends used to collect minnows for his business. Sorenson reminiscenced about the group of Antioch outdoorsmen and businessmen who started NICC, and their reason for such a venture: They saw a situation that no one else in the area seemed to care about and put together a group of like-minded individuals to solve the problem. NICC was formed to help raise funds to purchase fish for area lakes that had experienced significant winter kills. They raised some money, stocked some fish, and started a tradition.

Fifty years after the initial derby, NICC is still a group of like-minded outdoor enthusiasts who share information, educate young people and are helping the surrounding area with good deeds.

If you're not busy the weekend of February 13, take a trip to Channel Lake.

Celebrate history. Maybe you'll pull in the fish that they reminiscence about at their 100th anniversary in 2060.

Ray Winkowsi of Delavan, Wisc. shows off a 34-inch northern pike he hooked on a tip-up device at Channel Lake in northern Illinois.

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