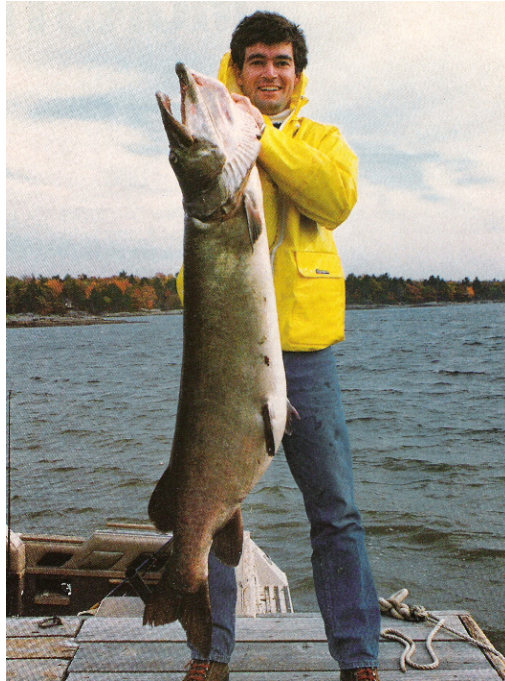


Ken O'Brien 65-0 - 1988

1988 ... We'll end this section now with a review of the limited controversy that the more modern day capture of a giant muskie fit for the record book underwent; Ken O'Brien's 65-pounder from the Moon River in 1988. I received a phone call about it within an hour of its being caught (I have "good" sources and informants!).



Last of the photo sequence courtesy John Power

Toronto, Ontario angler Ken O'Brien was fishing for *What ever would bite*, as he told me in a telephone interview. His catch made immediate international news and was covered in dozens of newspapers in the US and Canada and his catch story was written about by me in *Fishing Facts* magazine in the January 1989 issue as well as in *Ontario Out of Doors* magazine in the February 1989 issue by O'Brien with John Power. I had, after getting the details of the catch from Ken on the telephone, made a trip to Mac Tier, Ontario thereafter and viewed the frozen fish.



O'Brien's fish right out of the freezer

Later I interviewed one of O'Brien's boat partners, Mark Airstone, in Toronto. While at Mac Tier, Gary Finkler and I acquired the scale O'Brien's fish had been weighed on with the permission of the scale's owner Derek Chantler. This scale had been taken to George Grisdale's resort by Chantler, where the fish was weighed within 30-minutes after he had been called. Gary took the scale to weights and measures for checking.

One thing that had bothered me was that when I did a *cursory* re-weighing of the frozen fish on a bathroom scale and a 60-pound capacity Chattilon scale while there, it was considerably short of 65 pounds. My rough calculations after weighing myself and then myself while holding the fish on the bathroom scale I came up a weight of about 56-pounds and a similar weight loss was confirmed with the Chattilon scale (registering only ½-pound increments), roughly 9-pounds less than the official registered weight. I chalked the difference up to the bathrooms scale inaccuracy and the uncertain reading of the Chattilon scale, and the difficulty of reading them, plus the fact that the fish had hung in the sun and wind for several hours and had been wrapped in heavy plastic and tied shut. The fish was then placed in a chest freezer that had been off and was warm. The first thing I noticed upon unwrapping the frozen fish, with Mr. O'Brien's permission, was a considerable amount of sheet ice between the fish and the plastic. I believed that it was additional moisture lost from the fish but wondered later if it could account for a large portion of the huge weight loss. In a 2006 consultation with a fisheries scientist with the Wisconsin DNR, I learned that the 53-pound 12-ounce Myrl McFaul muskellunge caught from North Twin Lake, Wisconsin in 1954 had experienced a 4-pound weight loss in a period of 4-days of being frozen after the catch. This weight loss was attributed by the DNR as being due to "evaporation." It is therefore, logical to assume that the dehydration of the O'Brien muskellunge could easily be an accumulative effect of hanging for several hours in the wind and sun, and excessive dehydration due to being placed in a warm freezer and being frozen for eight days before being reweighed, not to mention the fishes "slime" weight loss; considerable on a fish of this size.

Over the years, that weight discrepancy and my uncertain interpretation and misinterpretation of the scale certification checks both the one I had done as well as the later official scale certification worked on me. This occurred during a period of time when several other world record muskies were being questioned mostly on the Internet at the time and caused me to review it further, especially my *assumption* of scale discrepancy. I then made a mild protest to the NFWFHF in 2002 regarding the O'Brien record.

My rationale, that if a scale discrepancy disqualified Robert Malo's record contending fish, without even considering the huge weight loss I observed for O'Brien's fish, likewise the same

scale criteria should be applied to the O'Brien record even though it had already been accepted by both the NFWFHF and IGFA. Surprisingly then NFWFHF Executive Director Ted Dzialo concurred without much resistance. The O'Brien record and the Gary Ishii line-class record which was weighed on the same scale were set-aside by the NFWFHF. O'Brien's fish was moved to the category of "Unofficial" as had been done with the Malo fish.

Regretfully, I was the one that questioned O'Brien's muskie due to concerns with the weigh-in protocol. I then reported this news in the October/November 2002 issue of *Musky Hunter*.

Subsequent to this decision another NFWFHF records Advisor Brad Latvaitis got involved. After his usual thorough and insightful review of the scale interpretation matter it was decided that indeed proper scale certification protocol had been followed for the O'Brien fish. He reported *...O'Brien's precise protocol for weigh-in was compromised when the scale used by O'Brien was brought to the Canada Consumers and Corporate Affairs Department of Weights and Measures. The scale was found to "weigh within 1/4 pound". This information was initially interpreted as either 1/4 pound heavy or 1/4 pound light instead of within 1/4 pound (4 ounces), i.e. a 66 pound weight within 1/4 pound would read between 65 pounds 14 ounces and 66 pounds 2 ounces rather than between 65 3/4 pounds and 66 1/4 pounds. Additionally, documentation of certification methods were not provided including weights used for testing, whether certification was attempted at a lesser weight, i.e. within 1/8 pound, and what the scale read compared to known weights at least equal to the weight of O'Brien's musky.*

Nevertheless, the difference in results between Thurston (MNR District Biologist that certified the scale) and the (Weight and Measures) inspector are useful and provide results that are negligible. Thurston's methods were in accordance with FFHF protocol, and included documented, acceptable, methods of certification, while the certification conducted by the weights and measures inspector was inferior and lacked documentation compared to Thurston's. The FFHF suspects that the inspector determined the accuracy of the scale, rather than to certify the scale's accuracy at a given known weight. An honest mistake was made in either the questions that were asked of the inspector, or the questions that the inspector heard.

The O'Brien application for record indicated a weight of 65-pounds and 0-ounces. Thurston determined that a 65 pound weight on O'Brien's scale would read between 64 pounds 15 ounces and 65 pounds. Also, since Thurston established that the O'Brien scale read light, the inspector's scale accuracy check would suggest that a weight of 65 pounds would read between 64 pounds 14 ounces and 65 pounds on O'Brien's scale. Therefore, since the musky weighed 65 pounds on the O'Brien scale, it weighed at least this amount to as much as 2 ounces more. As the additional ounces could not be verified, the weight of 65 pounds was accepted as official and the record was reinstated.

Subsequently the decision to set-aside the O'Brien and Ishii records was reversed as was reported in the December 2002/January 2003 issue of *Musky Hunter* magazine. As stated in that report *..."doing a re-examination of the scale documentation, it was learned that the O'Brien fish actually weighed slightly over 65 pounds rather than under 65 pounds as first thought," the Hall announced in a statement. "The original action was an oversight due to*

misinterpretation of the data. The submitted weight of 65 pounds is therefore acceptable and the scale verification process that took place to substantiate it did indeed meet Hall of Fame protocol.”

The Ishii fish, a 55-pounder caught in 1981 which was weighed on the same scale and had also been set aside for that reason, has been reinstated as well.

In the statement, the Hall apologized for its actions and is sorry for any inconvenience caused. “We hope you realize what a time-consuming effort record keeping can be. We will continue to strive to maintain an accurate records list.”

Well, apparently the *current* NFWFHF leadership doesn't share that last statements feeling based on their Spray fiasco in upholding that record in 2006, when in 1992, the NFWFHF disqualified the Lawton record with far less evidence than was provided the NFWFHF by the WRMA in that 2005 Spray record protest.





The photo sequence beginning on the previous page are the first photographs taken of O'Brien's fish and have never before been published. The first photo, while difficult to see, shows O'Brien's fish during the battle. The second photo was taken immediately after the fish was boated. Look close and you can see the small Rapala hooked to the fish's jaw. The third photo was taken after O'Brien had slit the fish's throat to kill it. The color version shows the bottom of the boat filled with blood. Note the small three-piece-screw-together gaff hook used to land it! The fourth photo was taken immediately after returning to Jim Grisdale's resort dock. Photos courtesy Mark Airstone.

At any rate to return to the O'Brien fish; that fish was the most highly scrutinized large muskellunge catch ever **at the time of the catch**, as I later learned. An estimated 400 people viewed the fish through out the day and it was never out of sight of several witnesses. There has been some concern expressed over the years about the "bloated" appearance of the fish in most photographs. The concern that has been expressed centers around the suggestion that perhaps the fish had been filled with water prior to weighing. My more recent personal interviews with those first on the scene as well as those charged with the handling of the fish prior to weighing found that the suggestion was baseless and it simply was not done. I personally know the key individuals that were involved in the fish handling process and were satisfied with their explanations of the "chain of custody" and handling of the fish from the time it was brought to shore until it was weighed in front of literally hundreds of witnesses.



*First photo of fish hanging prior to being weighed.
Ed Barbossa's son shown with the fish. Photo courtesy Ed Barbossa.*

In 2003, I spoke first with George Grisdale, owner of the resort where O'Brien's fish was weighed. He told me that he took no photographs. George further related that he was not involved in the "washing off" or weighing process, but that his son George Jr. was involved. I called young George and learned that he had been the "hose man" when the fish was brought to his dad's resort and the fish was washed off. He assured me in no uncertain terms, in fact was adamant, that when the fish was washed off the hose was "not" placed inside the fish. He commented that the fish was *...abnormally wide*. He related to me that the fish hung for *...2 ½ to 3 ½ hours*.

I next talked to Marion Grisdale. Marion too was adamant that no water from the hose got into the fish. *We know better!*, she told me. She said that the bloated belly look was *...due to the fish hanging and the stomach sagging*. Marion had told me in 1988 that she had the guys lay the fish on the ground and she measured it at 56 ½-inches in length. I neglected to find out from her if that was a total length or fork length.



*Marion Grisdale (l) and Ken O'Brien (r) posing with a Canadian "meter" stick. Note the bloated belly from sagging insides.
Photos courtesy Derek Chantler*

Warren Wilkinson was on the scene almost immediately and in fact was fishing not far from O'Brien when the fish was caught. It was he who contacted a local Ministry of Natural Resources fisheries biologist from Perry Sound to come out and the biologist arrived within the hour followed closely by his supervisor Lloyd Thurston. Thurston also saw to the proper scale certification for the record application processes. Due to the efforts of Wilkinson and Thurston, O'Brien's muskie became the new Canadian muskellunge record and line class records with both the IGFA and the NFWFHF. Subsequent to the Lawton set-aside by IGFA in 1992, O'Brien's fish became the IGFA's All-tackle world record for a time.



*Smilin' Ken. Note in this sequence how much "appearance" of fish size is affected by camera location. Even though O'Brien is standing beside his fish in both photos, the right photo simply doesn't do the fish justice!
Photos courtesy Derek Chantler*

In the summer of 2006 and again in April of 2007, I had the opportunity to interview past Muskies Canada President Warren Wilkinson to further clarify the events of the day. I hadn't known it at the time of my O'Brien protest but Warren was the person responsible for the entire O'Brien record application process. According to Warren the fish was never in O'Brien's

possession when there weren't witnesses present including the catch itself until it was weighed and later released to Mr. Thurston and placed in George Grisdales freezer. I questioned Warren about the "chain of custody" and other pertinent information during my 2007 interview. Following are the questions and his answers.

Larry: Were you near O'Brien when the fish was caught?

Warren: No, I was in another area of the river and heard about it right away on the radio. We stopped fishing immediately and made a mad dash to George Grisdales resort.

Larry: Were there witnesses to the catch who were also near O'Brien on the trip in from the catch site?

Warren: Yes, several Muskies Canada members witnessed the catch and followed O'Brien and his boat partners with the fish.

Larry: According to Ed Barbossa, O'Brien stopped at the resort he was staying at looking for a scale before returning to Jim Grisdales resort where he had rented a boat. Did they follow him there?

Warren: Yes, MCI board member Davie was there through the entire transition, including moving the fish on a wooden pallet from Jim's to George Grisdales resort as they had no scales at Jim's and George did have one, although it was not sufficient to weigh O'Brien's fish.

Larry: I understand that you arrived after O'Brien and his partners got to George Grisdales resort, but was there when the fish was brought over from Jim's, is that correct?

Warren: Yes.

Larry: Did you witness the fish being washed off with a hose after it arrived at George's?

Warren: Yes. This was done at the dock at George's and was done with a hose with the fish still lying down on the pallet and before it was ever hung on the stairway by the house.

Larry: That water hose, obvious in several of the photographs showing the fish hanging, has been one of the reasons the "water in the fish" hypothesis began. Can you tell me more about that?

Warren: Yes. That hose in the photographs was attached at the house right behind where the fish hung. However, the outlet end of the hose was clear down at the dock and was used there.

Larry: When was length and girth measured?

Warren: It was done with the fish lying on the dock before the fish was weighed and hung for display. Since George Grisdales scale wouldn't weigh the fish a call was made to Deer Horn Lodge. Derek Chantler brought his scale in and the fish was weighed on it.

Larry: The affidavit length for O'Brien's fish is 58-inches. Was that a hanging measurement?

Warren: No, the total length was the length of the fish along the flat surface of the dock and was taken with a tape measure from the tip of the longest jaw to the tip of the tail.

Larry: Do you have any idea why Marion Grisdales "lying down" length measurement was 56 ½-inches?

Warren: Perhaps that was a fork length measurement, as that is the measurement we obtained for fork length when the fish was measured on the dock. We also measured the girth at the same time at 30 ½-inches.

Larry: When I remeasured the fish in 1988, I came up with a total length of only 54-inches. Any thoughts on that?

Warren: As you know, O'Brien had cut the throat of his fish to kill it. It is entirely likely that that cut was overlapped when frozen shortening the fish's total length along with the shrinkage from freezing (Note: the previous photo of me with the frozen fish shows the head in a "bent down" position, likely overlapping the cut in the fish's throat).

Larry: How long after the actual catch was the fish weighed?

Warren: Approximately one hour.

Larry: Do you have a photograph of the fish on the scale?

Warren: No, but there is likely one in existence as most people there were taking pictures (and video).

Larry: Was the rope used to hang O'Brien's fish removed when the fish was weighed?

Warren: Yes.

Larry: Who was the MNR biologist that came out from Parry Sound?

Warren: I can't recall his name right now, but Lloyd Thurston, his supervisor, came shortly after.

Larry: Was the biologist there during the weighing?

Warren: I can't recall, but Lloyd Thurston his supervisor was. In fact, Lloyd supervised the weighing along with John Power of the Toronto Star.

Larry: *After the official weighing and the fish had been displayed for 2-3 hours, what transpired next?*

Warren: *After most folks had left, Lloyd Thurston wrapped the fish and placed it in George Grisdale's freezer where it remained until you removed it 8 days later. After your visit, Lloyd Thurston then took the fish to Dr. Crossman at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Immediately after the catch, Paul Gasbarino removed a cleithrum bone and got it to Dr. Crossman as well for aging.*

Larry: *How soon after the catch did Dr. Crossman examine the stomach contents?*

Warren: *Lloyd Thurston took the fish to Dr. Crossman on Wednesday the 24th, right after your visit to see the fish at George Grisdale's resort.*

Larry: *Did Dr. Crossman reweigh the fish?*

Warren: *No.*



These "bloated-belly" shots were taken after the fish had been weighed and just prior to its being placed in George Grisdale's (left above center) freezer. O'Brien, holding the fish against his chest forcing the stomach out, enhanced the "bloated" appearance of his fish. Photos courtesy Derek Chantler, Deer Horn Lodge

As noted above, O'Brien later that day relinquished possession of the fish with witnesses still present. It was placed in the freezer of resort owner George Grisdale where it was when I saw it. The internal cavity of the fish was later examined by fisheries scientist Dr. Ed Crossman of the Royal Ontario Museum and University of Toronto and nothing unnatural was found therein. Dr. Crossman signed the O'Brien record application. The "chain of custody" of the fish is sound and the fish was never out of sight of witnesses from the capture until released to Lloyd Thurston, Ministry of Natural Resources supervisor and thence to Dr. Crossman.

On July 12, 1989 I received the following letter from Dr. E.J. "Ed" Crossman on Royal Ontario Museum stationery with regard to his removal of the stomach contents of O'Brien's fish in 1988 (exact date of removal not noted but it was within the two-week period after the catch):

Dear Larry:

I removed the stomach contents from O'Brien's fish when we were preparing it for the model's we made here at ROM. The mould for those models was made before the fish went to the taxidermist.

I had hoped contents may have been a single easily identified individual fish. Instead they turned out to be one recognizable bullhead and a second probable bullhead and a lot of disarticulated bones. As a result, I have them in alcohol and still have not gotten down to checking for obvious indicators of other species among the loose bones.

I removed the two ovaries and made them available to Bernard Lebeau...

Sincerely,

Ed.

Dr. E.J. Crossman

Curator

Department of Ichthyology & Herpetology

Ed then hand penned a P.S.:

Bernard has counted them he says (the eggs in the ovaries). His estimate came out a little over 850,000. This is far greater than anything in Carlander's summary. I did not check any further...EJC

This massive amount of eggs contained within O'Brien's fish could be a contributing factor to the fish's large "bloated belly."



O'Brien's taxidermist shown holding the fish during the mounting process. Photo courtesy Gary Finkler

I have known Warren Wilkinson, who is a ski instructor for the US Olympic Ski Team in the winter and a fishing guide in Ontario where he resides during the summer, for about 20 years. When I learned that it was he who had orchestrated the O'Brien record process any doubts that I had previously immediately dissipated. I wish I had known this before my protest. I now believe the O'Brien fish to be beyond reproach! The IGFA listed the O'Brien muskellunge as their all-tackle world record after they had set-aside the Lawton record in 1992. It remained their record

until replaced by the Cal Johnson fish in 1995. The Johnson fish is now under scrutiny and if set-aside, O'Brien's fish is likely to return to the top of IGFA's world record list.

Note: It has been learned that efforts are underway to obtain further documentation and affidavits for the O'Brien fish and that application for his fish may be made to the new ***Modern Day Muskellunge World Record Keeping Program***. See

<http://muskie.outdoorsfirst.com/articles/04.15.2007/1036/modern.day.muskellunge.world.record.keeping/index.htm>

If this is done, it will still have to pass the scrutiny of the Committee and meet all of the current rules protocol.

As was stated in the Spray section above several people have suggested to the NFWFHF that they institute a Modern Day World Record Program and also provide for the recognition of the Historical Muskellunge World Records. Before anyone else, the late John Husar had the idea and expressed it in his August 28, 1992 column in the ***Chicago Tribune***. It said ***...I believe the sport needs a way to enshrine its history, no matter how clouded some of those early legends have become.***

Likewise, legitimate anglers with modern equipment and higher standards of certification should not suffer by comparison to the looser standards of yesteryear. Their achievements emerging from an era of high pressure angling and land development that has cut into the quality of certain fish population's, deserve a category of their own.

The answer is simple. Create modern record categories while still glorifying the achievements from the past..."

NFWFHF and IGFA Director's are you listening? I would hope that the lessons learned from this Chapter are speaking loud and clear!!

The Parting Line: Disclaimer and Conclusion

Ramsell *Disclaimer*: My newly postulated position of not “messing” with the **Historic Muskellunge World Records** is clearly stated in this Volume. Any modification of muskellunge record history should be the sole responsibility of the original sanctioning body or the angler directly involved. However, I concede that it is *apparent* that some of history’s world record muskies were likely less than claimed by their captors based on the professional photogrammetry completed to date, but even that particular science has limitations.

Further, I believe that my analysis and debunking of Dettloff’s *selective revisionist history* is sufficient to restore the credibility of Haver, Hanser and Lawton and uphold their **Field & Stream** acceptance as world records at the time of capture. Ironically had it not been for Mr. Dettloff’s attempts to discredit almost all world records caught over the past 68 years with the exception of the Hayward records, the WRMA wouldn’t be in existence. Had the NFWFHF and IGFA, “powers that were” at the time in 1992, realized what a “can of worms” was about to be opened when they “disqualified” and “set-aside,” respectively, without “going the extra mile” to assure that the correct decision was being made for the Lawton record as a result of the Dettloff investigation, it is highly unlikely that the record confusion of the ensuing “world record war years” would have taken place and nearly doubled the size of this book!

If it seems that I have been unusually harsh on John Dettloff throughout this Volume, it is because I have lost all respect for “an historian gone awry.” As I grew up and muskies became more and more an important part of my life, my “hero” was Art Lawton. Why? Certainly not because he caught his world record from the area I grew up fishing muskies in; Hayward, Wisconsin’s renowned muskellunge waters. Waters where five previous world records had been taken to be sure, but they had been surpassed. No, it was because Art held the world record and it was the largest muskellunge ever caught, duly recorded and sanctioned; *The Holy Grail* of muskellunge angling. He was top dog. He was the king of all muskie anglers. And he had caught it from water I had never seen. No matter, it was still a “muskellunge.” It was “the target” for muskie anglers everywhere to shoot for. Some twenty years later, ironically Art became a personal friend as well.



***Lawton and Author during Art’s last
fishing trip in 1978 before he died.
Left photo courtesy Ed Scholten right author***

Dettloff meanwhile was ensconced in “tunnel vision” for just the Hayward area records and promotion of same. He stole the glory from my hero for the benefit of his! And he did it unfairly and in a biased manner. He maneuvered himself into a position of authority with one of the current major record keepers and levered it to obtain personal goals. It is truly a sad day when someone forsakes historical truths and attempts to selectively alter muskellunge history based solely on the locale from which a record fish was caught, all in the name of promotion and tourism as he has apparently done. I don't know if Art Lawton did indeed catch a 69-pound 15-ounce muskellunge and neither does Mr. Dettloff. Likewise I don't know if Louie Spray or Cal Johnson caught the record fish they claimed and neither does John. We weren't there. So let's agree to leave the historic catches of our great sport just that; historic. Or at the very least let's treat all historic catches equally fair. That has not been done and I'm mad as hell about it!

I think these are good thoughts with which to end **Volume I**.

Larry Ramsell, June 2007