

Naze Baits hooks attention in muskie fishing market

by Matt Frey, Medford Star News
A good fish story requires some skill and smarts to put the angler in position to have a story to tell. Then, it often takes luck — combined with the skill and smarts — to create a happy ending.

For Corey Nazer, a social studies teacher at Medford Area Senior High and a muskellunge fishing enthusiast, it took time but the pieces fell into place to turn a prototype created by his friend and fishing partner Josh Sedlacek into the Livid Fish lure that launched Naze Baits, the company the two co-own.

Naze Baits sells two versions of the Livid Fish, the 9-inch model that got it all started and a smaller 7-inch version, as well as two topwater lures, the Tin Head and the Twisted Tin Head, which includes a rubber tail. All are available in a wide variety of color patterns.

Nazer estimates sales have ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 units the past few years. Naze Baits has sold lures to sports shops and anglers in 11 countries and close to 20 states.

"It's not going to replace my job," Nazer said. "But this is probably the greatest thing. We have never taken a loan out. We have invested almost every penny back into it. We're now at a point where we're finally starting to see some profits. Not a ton, but just enough. I can tell Sally, my wife, I'm going to take this trip and it's not going to cost the family a dime. That's cool. If that's all it does, I'm totally satisfied."

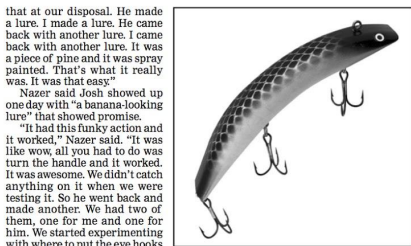
"But to see it grow is really satisfying. I can tell my people are married to their businesses. Creating something people want and getting the word out about your business is one of the most satisfying things ever."

It started when Nazer and Sedlacek, buddies from Chippewa Falls, just decided in their late teens to start muskie fishing. Included in the initial equipment purchases were some wood lures.

"I know Josh actually started putting with lures before I did," Nazer said. "My dad is a wood worker. Josh is a wood worker. I like wood working in construction. Josh and I were building his first home together at the time. So we were constantly working with saws. We had all of



A WHOLE LOTTA MUSKIE — Dave Holzmer hoists a 55.25-inch muskie he caught on a Naze bait in 2014. In that year, the baits manufactured in Medford hooked six muskies over 50 inches.



A Naze Bait Livid Fish

that at our disposal. He made a lure. I made a lure. He came back with another lure. I came back with another lure. It was a piece of pine and it was spray painted. That's what it really was. It was that easy!"

Nazer said Josh showed up one day with "a banana-looking lure" that showed promise.

"It had this funky action and it worked," Nazer said. "It was like wow, all you had to do was turn the handle and it worked. It was awesome. We didn't catch anything on it when we were testing it. So he went back and made another. We had two of them, one for me and one for him. We started experimenting with where to put the eye hooks and the hooks so it functioned properly and we really felt like we had something nailed down."

"The verification came on May 7, 2006 when Nazer landed a 47-inch beauty on the Petrowsell Flowage."

"We found an inlet where a creek was flowing in and it dropped off to 14 feet," he said. "It just looked right. I'm not going to say it was the first cast or the second cast, but it definitely was not 20 casts. I had a big fish on and

it ended up being a 47-incher. The biggest fish he and I had ever caught up to that point was 40 inches and that was actually the same fish."

That was enough for Nazer and Sedlacek to try producing and selling the lure. Sedlacek handled the woodwork, while Nazer did the painting.

For the first few years, the lures were made of wood. Nazer credited another teacher and muskie enthusiast in the Medford district, Garrett Shipman, with helping him perfect the painting process on the wood lures. While sales were OK at the time, Nazer said the turning point in the business came about five years ago when Sedlacek wasn't sure he could devote as much time to making lures. Nazer guessed it would

take his partner three 8-hour days to make 150 lures.

"At some point, maybe the 2011 fish, Josh said we gotta make a decision on what we're going to do here," Nazer said. "I said, 'I don't know if I can handle this cutting out

Please see Baits, page 5

Baits, from page 4

the wood stuff. It's going to be a big investment. He'd probably utilized \$8,000-\$8,000 worth of wood-working equipment that I didn't know if I wanted to reinvest in and I'm not going to do it up at school. He said maybe we need to look into plastic."

As luck would have it, not long before this, Nazer had a discussion about plastics with Dale Baumann, president of Wadial Plastics in Medford, who had offered to help if Nazer wanted to go in that direction.

"About a year later, I went to Dale and I said what are my options," Nazer said. "I can't fork over thousands and thousands of dollars for this, can you work with me? He said yes. It was awesome. You can tell Dale has a soft spot in his heart for entrepreneurs and local guys."

Wadal now creates and injects the plastic molds and Nazer still does the painting, though he again had to seek out advice from local experts to find the right process. He credits Curt Scholl of Black River Body and Custom and Tony Potonick at Car Quest with helping him find answers to his questions about painting plastic.

The switch allows Nazer to keep a large inventory on hand to quickly process orders, and he doesn't have to feel guilty

about giving samples to guides, giving lures to clubs for prizes and giveaways or making a mistake on the paint job.

"You could tell I got more baits in the hands of people," he said. "I donated to muskie clubs. I donated to guides. I was willing to send samples. Before, guys would say send me a sample. I'd say I can't. This thing represents too much energy to just give it away, which really held back what we were trying to do."

Another key was the availability of Medford's high school pool, where Nazer can test lure movement and toughness and the paint job.

"Some people like that trial-and-error part," Nazer said. "I just

want to get where it's working. I hated the trial and error. I hated the paint it up, go try it in the Medford pool. That school pool has been huge in making this bait. I can go up there at 9 a.m., no one's there and if the covers are off I can try stuff. I can try it in December when the lakes are frozen. I'd go up there and I'd fish with it for a half hour, try to scrape it on the bottom, try to beat up the paint."

Nazer said the movement and ease of use is what makes the lures so attractive to anglers. They can be casted or trolled.



Naze Baits co-owner Corey Nazer shows the 52.5-inch muskie with an estimated weight of 46.5 pounds that he hooked last fall on one of his company's lures.

For those who cast, Nazer said the lure does not feel hard or heavy to reel in. It also seems to be very durable.

"The number-one thing I hear from everybody is the wobble on the way up," he said. "It just feels like a common phrase when I'm selling it at show. The wobble on the way up. That's probably 10-to-1 what I hear comments on when guys come back. I love that movement on the way up. I could not lose that going from wood to plastic. Wadial Plastics said, 'what weight do you want?' I really didn't know. I wanted it to be close to (what the wood was). The plastic is actually slightly heavier than the wood one because the one that matched the wood

estimated weight on that fish was 46.5 pounds.

Nazer said seeing the testimonials and photos coming into his inbox is rewarding.

"There's a few people out there, this is their favorite lure," he said. "This is their go-to lure. They're saying if I can't catch anything on a Naze Bait, on a Livid fish, then I'm not catching it at all. That's cool.

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Or, another good one, a girl down in the Madison area said "I hooked a muskie fishing." It was awesome."

Nazer just signed on to a sponsor on Outdoor Bound TV, a weekly show broadcast by ABC and hosted by Rib Lake native Kurt Walbeck. Nazer is

weight didn't have the correct buoyancy and then didn't have the right movement."

In 2014, six fish longer than 50 inches were caught on Naze Baits. One of the lure's biggest fans is Dave Holzmer, who trolls for muskies from a pontoon boat on Lake Miller Lacs in Minnesota. He hooked a 55.25-inch monster that year. Last fall, he was controlling the boat when Nazer latched into his biggest fish ever, a 52.5-inch behemoth with a 27-inch girth. The

going to take two Canadian muskie fishing trips to hopefully fill two episodes that will air early next year.

"He's tapping two other muskie shows in northern Wisconsin this year yet with some guides and he said we'll use your product as well, so it's going to get some air time," Nazer said. "It legitimizes what I'm doing to a certain population of people. Some people need to see it on a commercial. They need to see it on Facebook, they need to see someone else talking about it. I'm hoping that's going to be big."

How big the business will get is uncertain. Nazer said he has three more ideas for lures he could tackle in the future, if he wants to take it that far.

"I do really take a lot of pride in knowing there are people in this community when I go into Wadial Plastics I see them working on the machines — they're going to help pay their mortgage or their car off not completely by me, not even close, but in a very small way I'm contributing to the livelihood of people. I can say anything is Wisconsin and American made. A lot of it is Wisconsin made."

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