

Leaders of the Pack.

By DJ Muller

Many people ask me about leaders. What size to use and how long they should be, how to attach them to the line. These are questions that are frequently asked and really, there are no right answers for them. It is funny how good marketing makes one think that leaders are a must for those that surf fish. "Fluorocarbon is invisible to the fish," is often mentioned. "You will catch more fish by using a proper leader," someone, somewhere has stated. In reality leaders are questionable at best. One of the best surfcasters that I know, George Tompkins, has caught more stripers from the surf than any of us. I was surprised when I fished with him one day and saw that he did not use a leader. I said to him, "Where's your leader?" "I don't use a leader, I just tie my snap directly to my braid." I was surprised by this answer. It made me question a lot of things I did and the way I thought about leader usage. It made me take a hard look at why there is so much emphasis on leaders.

While fishing a mini-bass blitz one day I saw a guy banging bass on every cast. As I walked closer to see what kind of lure he was using, I could not help but notice that he had a black, wire leader on, the kind you use when bluefish are on the scene. Though any average surfcaster knows that wire leader and bass are a no-no, this particular guy didn't know and I don't know if at that point he cared. At that point in my fishing experience I thought that he was committing some sort of a bass fishing crime, but when I look back at guys like Tompkins using no leader at all, it all seems to add up. Many say that stripers are smart and fussy, when in truth they are animals that respond to a stimulus. Like the cat lying on the living room floor and a ball rolled in front of it, it will almost always whack the ball strictly out of instinct. When an offering is presented to a fish, the fish has interest in the movement, the action, the speed, the sound, and possibly the smell of the offering. It is doubtful that the fish says to itself..."I can't eat that good-looking fish because I see a string coming out of the front of its head."

Is Using A Leader Necessary?

So, is using a leader necessary? The answer is no but yes. No it is not needed but yes it works as an aid to you as a fisherman. I like to use a leader because I buy into the reduced visibility theory. I believe that the use of a leader does not really affect the fish's decision however sometimes I believe that it is definitely helpful for when fish do get finicky. Why take a chance? Reduce factors that can influence a fish's decision on whether or not to strike.

The other reason and probably the main reason why I would use a leader has nothing to do with what the fish sees and it has everything to do with the state of my hands. I would estimate that about 80% of the fish I catch are dragged up or pulled up by the leader. If you do not have a leader on and you are using braid, you have a serious cut to your hand coming. By grabbing the leader it saves my hands from nasty cuts. Most of the time I use 80 pound test mono as leader. I can grab the leader and lift or pull with little fear of cuts.

Secondly leader comes into play when fish with teeth or rocks with teeth come into my zone. Blues that engulf your entire shad or bucktail will have a tough time getting

through 80-100 pound test mono as opposed to 30, 40, or even 50. When fish run in and around rocks, your leader becomes your lifeline to possibly your biggest fish of the year or perhaps your career in the wash.

Attaching Your Leader.

The leader can be attached to the tag end of your main line in one of two ways. One is by going straight on to a barrel swivel and then adding your leader to your barrel swivel. If you are tying on to braided line use a Palomar knot, if tying onto monofilament then go with an improved clinch knot. On the other end of your leader, go with a duo-lock snap. This allows for quick and easy lure changes.

Another way to attach your line to your leader is by the use of the Alberto knot. This is a knot that locks down amazingly tight and actually gets tighter the harder the pull.

What Kind of Leader Should I Use?

When I consider what leader that I will use it depends largely on where I am fishing, and what I am fishing for, or what kind of predators are present. For example, if I am fishing the open beach when bass are dominant and no rocks or jetties are present, when I will be washing my fish up onto the beach, I will go with a 12-16" leader and may go down as low as 40 pound test mono. But if I was fishing off a jetty in big white water where big blues are mixed in with bass, I will go with a 30" length of 100 pound test. This allows for me to reach down from my perch and grab the leader to help control or lift the fish. If the leader is too short I would not be able to reach it while holding my rod with my right hand. 100 pound test is very friendly on the hands especially with bigger fish coming up. If a fish does not care about the leader you mind as well go heavier and be safe.

I also need to mention that I hardly ever use fluorocarbon. This may be a comfort thing for me, but I have had several bad experiences with it and figured that for the additional cost, it just is not worth the money. Monofilament has worked fine.

Can the Leader Work as a Weapon?

This is a very good question because again the leader can add dimension to your fishing. The leader can also add a weapon to your arsenal in the form of a teaser. By adding a teaser you now have a two-pronged weapon for catching fish, one big offering in your lure and one small offering in your teaser. There are times when the bass will only hit small offerings or your teaser, the plug just works as the way to get your teaser into the strike zone.

There are a couple different ways for you to add a teaser to your set up. One is if you use a barrel swivel from your main line or braid to simply add a drop off and tie a teaser to it. The drop of 3-4 inches usually does the job. Another way is to tie a dropper loop in your leader and then adding the teaser by slipping the loop of your dropper through the eye of the hook and the doubling it back through. This way your teaser will be kept out away from your line and it will prevent it from getting wrapped up in your main leader.

The use of a leader is a comfort thing for you as a surfcaster or any fisherman for that matter. Experiment and try some of these suggestions and see what you come up with.

The leader is one of the elements that stand between you and your fish. Don't overlook it or underestimate its importance. Experience will be your best teacher but it is better to be safe now rather than sorry later. See you on the beach.