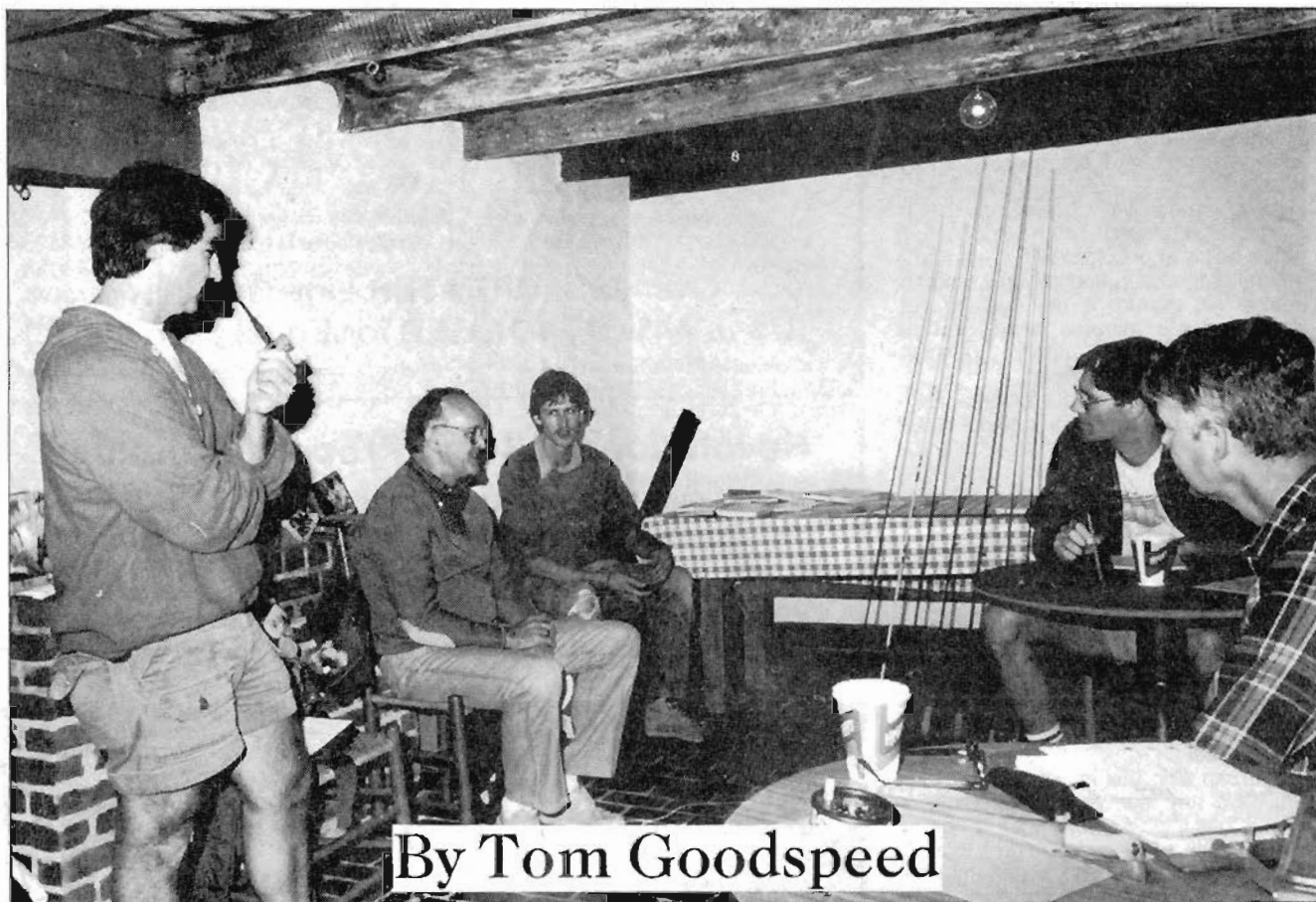


—Mark Kovach— Fly Casting Instructor



By Tom Goodspeed

Beginning at Big Pool, Maryland, just west of Hagerstown, and wending its serpentine path southeast to the mouth of the Monocacy River which drifts south from Frederick, flows that great river, the Potomac. This particular stretch of the river is that part of the Potomac that I love the most, a terrific rocky-bottomed smallmouth bass stream, and for those in the know, a nice walleye river, too.

At Harpers Ferry, plumb in the middle of this section of river, the Shenandoah flows up from the south to meet the Potomac, and this confluence is, to me, the most beautiful couple of miles on the entire river. Towering cliffs and mountainous hillsides border these two swift-flowing streams; resident Canada geese and native wood ducks cruise just above the clear, cold flows, and in the distance, bald eagles soar on the air currents rising from the valley below.

True, I'm a spin fisherman, and most of the bass I've caught here were hung on lures cast on light spinning tackle. But last year, I bought some fly casting gear - and to get a good second start on this classic sport that I used to enjoy many

years ago, I decided to enroll in Mark Kovach's Fly Fishing Course. Kovach is the river guide who runs those full-day float trips from Dam No. 3 above Harpers Ferry down to Brunswick that are so well known to area anglers. The course was an all day affair, with just four students and two instructors, beginning at 8:30 am, in Harpers Ferry, and closing around 9 pm that night, after we all caught bass in the Potomac River just below Sandy Hook. I learned that much of what I had been doing years ago could have been done better, and I learned all about the state of the art as it is today. I can't remember when I last spent such a productive and enjoyable day, and if fly fishing is on your agenda, or if you, like me, are just getting back into it, or are even just a so-so caster, you should look into this opportunity.

He started this school some ten years ago, offering both a beginners course (which is the one I took) and an advanced course. A year later, he started his float trips, taking two clients at a time on an all-day drift trip, covering about eight miles of this very section of water - what has to

be the prettiest water on the Potomac. While many of his clients on the drift trips are fly fishermen, he also takes spin fishermen like me and exposes them to water that they otherwise would never, never see. His trips are so popular that he now has five or six river guides working for him.

It was back after Hurricane Agnes, in 1972, when our rockfish began to disappear, that I first discovered the upper Potomac - and I have been in love with the river ever since. I guess it was Lefty Kreh who really got me involved with his great stories about wading and drifting up around Dam #3 and on down to Brunswick. Now, I doubt if Lefty would be caught alive on the river with a spinning rod - he is as pure a purist as Mark is - so I always had it in the back of my mind to take Mark's course, and this past fall I just got off my butt and did it. And am I glad I did!

Mark makes his living as a teacher and he is as enthusiastic a teacher as I've ever run across. He teaches this modern computerized engine diagnosis thing to the guys that the dealers hire to work on

your car. And when he stands up in front of a group, with his bushy handlebar mustache, his corn cob pipe, and his piercing green-blue eyes, he captivates his audience and holds them in the palm of his hand. You know the guy must be good when he can teach us how to tie the nail knot and the surgeons knot in the twinkling of an eye.

In the classroom portion of our instruction, we met in a picturesque old building in Harpers Ferry, breaking for lunch at the Anvil Restaurant down the street. The basic program began with a discussion of fly rods, went on to fly lines, leaders and tippets, reels, and accessories. Then we got into the meat of the program, studying the May flies, the Caddis fly, the Stone fly and the Midge. We looked at the life cycle of each, such as the May fly nymph changing to the dun May fly and then on to the spinner May fly. Mark explained how, on the Potomac, the progression of the May fly begins at 7:30 - 8:00 pm with the nymph stage, then moves on from 8:00 to 8:30 for the dun stage, and finally, from 8:30 on as spinners until it's all over at 11:00 pm. He told us how the May fly emerges around Seneca first, and then progresses upstream to his area by the third week in July, continuing on into the second week in August.

We talked about the helgramite-Dobson fly insect, and covered the terrestrial and aquatic insects, the minnows, the ants and on and on. Helping Mark on this ichthyology-entomology discussion was Pete Yarrington, a fly tier and guide who works with Mark on these schools. Pete is

the kind of guy who can turn out a #18 dry fly in four minutes!

Then we adjourned to the grass at the local school and put to work the casting techniques we had studied earlier. In the classroom, Mark had taught us how to cast, using a short, little rod - with yarn as the fly line. The system looked good, but the proof would come here on the playing field. We were clumsy at first, certainly awkward and a bit hesitant, but soon we all were casting right well. Not like Mark, of course, who showed us how to cast the full 90 feet of fly line down to the backing - now that is really laying it out!

On the cast, he taught us how to pull our arm back and then snap our wrist on the backcast, and then push the arm forward and to finally snap the wrist on the forward cast. He emphasized the straight line rod tip travel, and how to time the change of direction to just before the "candy cane" loop straightens.

He showed us the proper hand grip, and the 11:00 and 1:00 o'clock rod tip positions, and how to deliver the cast and to then pick up the drifting line once the drift is complete. He showed us how to control our loops, with wide, medium, and nice, tight loops. We worked on casting in all planes, vertically as is normal down to horizontal.

We shot our lines forward and backwards, with both short and long casts, and we worked on picking up slack line as well as how to deliberately lay our line down in a serpentine path, thus allowing for an unencumbered drift. Roll casts

were easy on the grass but an entirely different matter on the water - as I soon discovered.

We all wore jeans and sneakers down at the river and we just waded in. It was the first time that day that we had cast with a fly tied on to the end of our leaders, and I had a heck of a time at first. I wrapped the leader around my rod 3 or 4 times, hit myself on the back of the head once, and even cast an overhand knot into my leader. I think the lead-weighted mudler that I was using was my problem - it is surprisingly heavy for such a small lure. But soon I was doing better, after a bit of embarrassment. It turned out that I was the last to catch a bass - and after some serious thought about having it mounted, I released the fish so it could grow to the legal minimum.

It was after dark when the six of us finally waded ashore and called it quits for the day. We had tried to assimilate a wealth of information, and had put a good part of what we had learned to its logical test, fishing for smallmouths just above the railroad bridge over the Potomac at Harpers Ferry.

I know that I will need a lot of practice with my new fly rod - and that will come this spring. In the meanwhile, I think I'll sit in on Mark's advanced course now - not necessarily because I'm ready for it but because I get such a bang out of watching him teach. He is one heck of a teacher! For more data on his classes, or on his drift trips for that matter, he can be reached at 737 Thayer Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910, phone (301) 588-8742.