

Casting for an Education in Fly Fishing

THURMONT, Md.—Under the dark sky of a windblown afternoon, 10 men wearing rubber boots stood in a muddy meadow behind the Cozy Inn, and pretended to cast for trout.

"I feel like I'm just flailing away here," said one of the students, swinging 8½ feet of fishing pole and 15 feet of line through the air like a drunken Zorro.

"You are," said Mark Kovach, the mentor of this group of neophyte fly fishermen. With a few verbal tips and a bit of hands-on guidance, Kovach soon had the student tossing graceful casts to imaginary fish.

Fishing is like dancing. You can do it a long time without getting very good at it. Hang a worm-covered hook in water and wait. Throw a piece of plastic with hooks hanging below it toward the far shore, then reel it back in. If you don't catch anything, you can always complain that the fish weren't biting.

It is harder to fake it with a fly rod. Before you can fish, you have to learn to cast. And learning to cast can take days. Then there is the matter of bait. Most fly fishing magazines read like the master's thesis of an entomologist. Unless bugs are your hobby, the business of mayfly hatches and spent wing spinners can seem impenetrable.

"You look at all this stuff and say, 'It's too overwhelming,'" said Gary Clendenin, a dentist from Bethesda who paid \$65 to be overwhelmed this weekend at a day-long fly fishing seminar conducted by Kovach and Byron Susinno.

Kovach has been simplifying the mysteries of fly rodding for students each spring for six years. In the summer, he works as a professional fishing

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guide on the upper Potomac. In the winter he teaches cross-country skiing. During what's left of the year, he teaches auto mechanics at Northern Virginia Community College. Teaching is a vocation and hobby with Kovach, 35.

Susinno, 26, is a floor installer with a remarkable talent for tying pieces of feather and fur onto hooks to imitate bugs.

"I've had his artificial bugs out at a fishing show," said Kovach. "Every half-hour we have to pick them up, they keep walking away."

Most of the students at this class met Kovach during one of the fishing shows he rented space at this winter. We ranged in age from 25 to late 40s and in experience from beginner to novice. Our reasons for attending were equally varied.

Clendenin had been invited to Alaska this summer to visit his brother-in-law and wanted to be at least minimally competent to handle the 20-pound lake trout he hoped to encounter.

David Tallerico, 30, of Greenbelt, has been fishing with traditional spinning gear since he was a kid. Last Christmas, his mother gave him a fly rod and reel, so he figured he better learn to use it.

Jack McGrath, an aerospace engineer from Annandale, was hoping to learn what he had been doing wrong for the last 18 months. Being an intelligent fellow, he had bought the gear and a book of instructions.

"It was somewhat frustrating," said McGrath,

sitting in a conference room lit by fake tiffany lamps with piped Muzak, waiting for the lessons to begin. "I figured there has to be a better way of doing this."

The class began with equipment. Bamboo, fiberglass and graphite rods were passed from hand to hand. Double-tapered floating and sinking lines were handled next. Reels were discussed and advice given on what to buy and why.

"The biggest thing . . . to choosing a rod or reel is how much money you have to spend," said Kovach. "The difference between a \$30 rod and a \$200 one is like getting out of a Ford and into a Mercedes."

We got into bugs before lunch. Terrestrials, aquatics, mayflies, stoneflies, caddis nymphs. Fish diet, said Susinno, is a lot less complicated than it initially seems. "You can get into the entomology as much as you want or as little as you want," said Susinno.

With a lot of bugs in your arsenal, something should work, if you can put the fly where the trout can see it. For that skill, we retired to a field to practice casting for meadow trout. After an hour, Kovach pronounced our group ready for Big Hunting Creek, the presidential trout stream that flows through Camp David.

Because it was almost dark by the time we arrived at the river, our actual fishing was finished in 30 minutes. Just time enough to put theory into practice, and not long enough to be discouraged by a lack of luck.

"I think I need to practice just a little bit more," joked Clendenin, the dentist, shivering in the cold night air. "I just hope it's a little bit warmer in Alaska."



By Denis Collins—The Washington Post

Fly fishing instructor Mark Kovach helps David Tallerico improve his cast at a seminar he teaches each spring with Byron Susinno.