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Hooked at 50

How I got started fishing

by DONALD BAIN

Trust me," he said.

That was a line I had heard countless times from my agent but never from my daily luncheon companion, E. Z. Filler (a dentist, and that is his real name). He had just convinced me, a nonfisherman, to join him on a fly-fishing expedition to Weatherby's fishing lodge in Grand Lake Stream, Maine, on the Canadian border.

I had seen films of fly-fishermen, dressed up in battle gear and earnestly wading through streams and rapids in pursuit of trout or salmon whose only motivation to make it upstream was to spawn. Frankly, the whole idea seemed silly, and the fact that E. Z. had convinced me to try it is testimony to his persuasive powers and to my frame of mind at the time. A long, tough year had left my nerve ends exposed, so I was anxious to find a form of relaxation that would work for me. Years of competitive tennis had been fun but hardly relaxing. Music had been fairly effective—I'm a devoted jazz lover and vibraphonist—but even that pursuit, at least lately, had seemed part of a generally frenetic life. At the age of 50, and with a sense of mortality growing keener every day, I was receptive to almost anything except coin collecting, building ships in bottles, and Zen.

The Right Stuff

E. Z. took me to a local tackle shop, where he chose for me a beginner's fly-fishing kit by Cortland. It contained an eight-and-a-half-foot fiberglass rod, some appropriately weighted line, a nifty lightweight reel balanced to the rod, a spool of orange floating fly line (the color helps the fisherman, not the fish, track the line on the water), a package of leader (a short monofilament line that connects the fly line with a hook that is dressed to look like a fly), and, most important, an instruction booklet.

The next step was to sit in E. Z.'s den and rig everything together. My friend helped me attach 50 feet of backing line to the reel before tying that to the orange line, which was then connected to the leader with a tiny plastic coupling device. Then one last line, the hair-thin tippet, was tied to the leader. None of this was terribly difficult in concept, but the knots required to accomplish all these connections were almost beyond me. E. Z.'s dexterity was considerably greater, but, after all, he has spent his working life sewing gums together with even thinner material.

It took two days of driving to reach the camp but just a couple of hours to figure out that if catching fish was the point of all

this, I was missing it. Catching fish, however, wasn't the most important thing, at least not while I was standing at the edge of a shimmering, rippling trout stream, surrounded by blue sky and green trees. What did matter was that my world of deadlines and testy editors had vanished.

I'd fished from a boat before—a couple of deep-sea expeditions and some bass fishing on the Delaware River with my father—but this represented something vastly different and much more satisfying for me. I've always felt confined in a boat; here, by contrast, I had the constant option of strolling to another spot when the mood struck. (I was wearing sneakers, which kept me from wading, but there were plenty of flat areas from which to cast.) And whenever I felt like it, I simply left the stream to sit beneath a shade tree or to rest on the porch of a nearby cabin and read. Or nap. Then back to streamside.

There was also a thrill in feeling the delicate fly rod's whiplike action. No fishing rod in my experience had ever provided such visceral pleasure—such power and precision—when a cast went reasonably well. And as I directed the line farther across the water, more and more of my casts did, indeed, go reasonably well. The whole experience was so satisfying, and it gave me

Paulette Bogan



such a sense of well-being, that I had no need for the traditional argument—that the pleasure and challenge of the sport come from using artificial flies to fool a fish. As for the fly-fisherman's insistence that trout are somehow superior to "coarse" fish like bass, that was also irrelevant to me. After all, I wasn't actually catching anything.

Most of the people at Weatherby's are fanatical anglers. Jean Makin, who visits twice a year with her husband, gave me a tiny artificial fly and suggested I try it, smiling when I tucked it into a book of matches for safekeeping. When I attempted to return it to her at dinner that night, I received a fly-fishing lesson: Never return a fly. It is given as a gesture of friendship.

I returned to New York "hooked." I started reading books on fishing and bought some more gear: waders, boots, a multi-pocketed vest, flies, clippers, and polarized sunglasses with magnifying lenses on the bottom, which are great for those of us whose eyes are on the wrong side of 40 and who don't like fumbling when it's time to tie a different fly on the line. I bought a second rod, too, another Cortland, this one made of graphite. I then spent what seemed an inordinate amount of time in the yard practicing my casting technique, which is crucial not only to catching fish but to making an angler look good when he isn't. My total investment had now reached approximately \$500, a small price for peace of mind.

E. Z. and I began to take short trips to upper New York State's famed Beaverkill River, where I practiced my casting and actually began catching fish.

I made my second journey to Maine and to Weatherby's in June, which is salmon-fishing time up there. It was good to be well equipped and to have mastered the knots and some of the casting skills that make angling easier and more productive. The Makins were there again, as were 20 or so other diehards who occupied the 100-year-old, but well equipped, log cabins and who sat at their customary tables in the dining room whenever

the dinner bell rang. I felt very much at home in spite of my inexperience with "reading" insect hatches, scouting out pools where the biggest fish lie, and other angling skills.

The experienced hands were more than patient with me. At one point, I was standing in a fairly deep trough at the side of the stream, casting my fly into the shallow middle. Al Lester, an older gentleman who has been coming to Weatherby's long enough to have had a cabin named for him ("Lester's Hillside"), came over and gently asked if I'd mind his offering some advice. I told him I'd welcome it. He said, "You're standing where the fish are. Go to the middle and cast back over here." Following his advice, I caught a nice salmon in the very place where I had been wading. (The fish only briefly left the water, thank you; like most fly-fishermen, I almost always release my catch.)

That second Maine trip was a rite of passage for me: I now look forward to every fishing trip. My casting keeps improving, and more fish seem attracted to my flies. I enjoy fiddling with and caring for my growing collection of equipment. On a recent trip to London, I even bought a handmade bamboo rod at Hardy's. Most of all, however, I look forward to those moments when the world of deadlines and responsibilities disappears for hours, even days. And that is just what I can expect the next time I'm on another trout or salmon stream, preferably not standing where the fish are.

Weatherby's fishing lodge (Grand Lake Stream, ME 04637; 207-796-5558), open May to October, accommodates sports enthusiasts for \$52 per night, based on double occupancy. Dinner and breakfast are included.

