

Learning

by Mel Krieger

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Both of us were intimidated. Ruth, a tiny sixtyish-year-old lady was taking my fly fishing course in Sun Valley, Idaho. And while her big concern was learning to flycast, I would be spending two days attempting to teach one of the foremost educators in America. We survived and actually became friends but I didn't come out completely unscathed.

During a lecture, one of the students, a compulsive note taker, persisted in asking -almost demanding-specific answers to his questions "But, Mel, what is the exact length of a dry fly tippet? How many casts do I make to a fish before changing my fly? Are green waders better than brown waders?" After several interruptions and reasonably patient replies, I lost it. "Pete," I said, "You keep looking for black and white in fishing, and there is no black and white: The beauty of Our sport is that it's more of an art form than a science, we're not dealing in absolutes!" I was on a roll. Voice-rising, I proclaimed: "There are no absolutes...There are no absolutes in fishing! There are no absolutes in life!!!"

Silence filled the room.... Embarrassed, I finally spotted her amid the quieted faces and blurted "Isn't that so, Ruth?"

Loud and clear she replied "Absolutely!"

Of course, as Omar the poet concluded "Always coming out by the same door as in I went," I, too attempted to find absolutes in my newest passions, golf and Speycasting. I've read dozens of books and articles, submitted myself to interminable video watching and even taken private lessons – looking for the secret, the Holy Grail.

In golf, most of the information comes from champions who unquestionably play well. However they can't even agree on such basics as grip, stance, ball position, etc. *ad nauseum*.

Our flycasting world is identical. Who and what are we to believe? Obviously all of these instructions, however convoluted they appear, must work pretty well.

I'm certain that the majority of instructors first learn to cast a fly, and then later attempt to analyze and communicate their acquired skills. I use a trick question in my instructor workshops: "How many of you had to learn flycasting by yourself?" Invariably, almost everyone raises their hand. Well, I'll tell you what, there IS a Holy Grail in learning to flycast – and that is to flycast!!! Just like the real secret in golf is to smack golf balls.

After hitting balls at a local driving range, I commonly sit for a time watching others.

The good golfers, despite their varied styles, hit the ball cleanly. The lesser players, regardless of their swing or style, miss-hit the ball most of the time.

So far, in my golf search, I have found only one reference to this simple truth. Harvey Penick, a Hall of Fame golf teacher, explained to a complete beginner who requested lessons "Go home and practice the golf swing until you can consistently clip grass and then come to me."

A similar concept in flycasting would be the timing between back and forward casts; an elementary concept, but a difficult execution. A flycaster may have a variety of weaknesses in his or her casting stroke, but with the good timing that usually comes from experience, they can accomplish acceptable casts. On the other hand, someone without

that sense of timing would do poorly, regardless of their technique. These basic skills must come from the learner, not the instructor. The "just do it" slogan is a truism. The quintessence of learning is doing.

Instruction provides avenues for learners. Many instructors utilize a very narrow corridor, teaching an extremely concise style that is often comfortable for beginners. Wider corridors usually emphasize more substance than style, offering a somewhat broader basis for growth especially to the intermediate or advanced learner. Most instruction in both golf and flycasting consists of analysis. Some instructors become quite good at analyzing the golf swing or the flycasting stroke, a skill that is primarily useful to the more advanced learner. There are a few gifted instructors who understand many styles and can analyze the student as well as the casting stroke or the golf swing, fitting one to the other without the loss of fluidity and athleticism. Fewer still are the instructors who additionally are good communicators, able to reduce complex concepts to simpler solutions, and to reach and connect with a wide variety of learners. Finally we come to the elite in instruction-the truly extraordinary teachers, those wondrous people who are able to inspire students to want to learn, to grow, to understand that the climb can be even more exciting than the summit, and who themselves continue to learn and to grow.

In my book, the quintessence of teaching is inspiration.