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FEATURES

Fly Guy: How Brian Flechsig built Columbus' Mad River Outfitters into a fishing empire

Since opening his store in 1994, the fly-fishing enthusiast has gained an international reputation by flouting the traditions of an elitist sport.

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To some, Brian Flechsig's new boat might seem like an odd choice for fly-fishing. It's not an Adirondack guide boat, with a gleaming wooden hull and caned seats. Or a sleek poling skiff for hunting bonefish in the Caribbean flats. It's a bass boat, the muscle car of freshwater fishing, and Flechsig opens the throttle as soon as we clear the marina at Alum Creek Reservoir.

On this early May morning, we skim the flat surface at 50 miles per hour, with Flechsig answering questions over the roar of the 150-horsepower Mercury outboard as he searches for a sheltered cove that isn't already claimed by some other angler. The Ranger bass boat has more than 19 feet of aluminum hull from the transom to the bow, where a trolling motor hangs next to the forward swivel chair. Flechsig, founder and owner of Mad River Outfitters in Columbus, is indeed fishing for bass today, but he won't let the style of a boat define it.

"It's a 'whatever I'm fishing for that day' kind of boat," he shrugs. "It'll probably be mostly a muskie boat," he adds, referring to the popular nickname for the large, toothy game fish formally known as muskellunge.

To the uninitiated (and statistically, that probably includes most readers), using a fly rod to target muskellunge in a Midwestern reservoir from the swivel seat of a bass boat may seem perfectly reasonable. But for devotees of the niche sport

of fly-fishing, it's an unorthodox way to spend a day on the water, to say the least. Not too many years ago, it might have been blasphemy.

Flechsig, however, has built a successful business by ignoring, if not downright flouting, the tropes of his beloved pastime: mountain streams, bamboo rods, woven basket creels and a dainty speck of feather-dressed hook drifting lightly on the surface of a river before it's gobbled up by a hungry trout. Nearly 30 years ago, when Flechsig first opened a fly shop in a strip mall on Columbus' Northwest Side, the reaction of many in the industry was astonishment, if not ridicule — an outmoded view that hasn't completely disappeared. Even today, Flechsig observes, "People say, 'You run a fly shop out of *Columbus, Ohio?*'"

Indeed, he does, and Mad River Outfitters has become one of the largest independent dealers in the country for fly-fishing tackle, with a cult following on YouTube and a global customer base online. He and his staff regularly host trips to Brazil, Labrador, Louisiana, Montana and Alaska. His brick-and-mortar shop—much larger now, but still housed in the Olentangy Plaza shopping center on Bethel Road—draws people from all over the country, and he's established ancillary businesses such as Midwest Fly Fishing Schools, Ohio Fly Fishing Guides and Mad River Travel. His staff and industry peers say his success is based on an egalitarian attitude with his customers, an agnostic approach to fish species and his work as a tireless educator of and advocate for the sport.

"Fly shops have a reputation for being snooty places, where if a beginner walks in and asks basic questions, they ignore you," Flechsig says. "We are the antithesis of that. It doesn't matter who you are or your skill level. Everyone is welcome at MRO, and you can learn to fly-fish. It doesn't have to be expensive; it doesn't matter where you live; and it doesn't have to be for trout."

The finesse of fly-fishing

A word about fishing with a fly rod: Of the roughly 50 million Americans who fish, the great majority practice the more familiar method—using a rod, spinning reel and live or artificial bait heavy enough to unspool nearly weightless monofilament fishing line.

In 2019, about 7 million of those anglers reported using long, lightweight fly rods and a fly line, which is much thicker than standard fishing line and weighted with a coating of PVC. In fly-fishing, the weight of the line is used to carry a lightweight fly out over the water, where it lands with a more delicate presentation. Casting a fly rod requires more finesse than strength, especially when fishing in fast-moving water. Handled skillfully, long loops of line dance elegantly overhead for a moment before the line is released and unwinds smoothly until the fly settles softly onto the water. Novices, however, often find they've wrapped the long loops of line around a tree, the rod or maybe their head.

The most commonly targeted freshwater species include trout, salmon and other members of the family of fish known as salmonids. Fish that thrive in cold water and dominate rivers and lakes in mountains or northern latitudes. Fishing flies, sometimes hand-crafted by the angler, can be works of art: concoctions of feathers, fur and yarn created to imitate aquatic insects or small fish. For the true purist, the dry fly—a featherweight creation that floats on the water's surface—is the pinnacle of the art form, because coaxing a fish to rise to the surface requires a convincing fly and a soft landing.

“We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others,” begins the novel “A River Runs Through It,” by Norman Maclean. “He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.” In 1992, Maclean’s book was adapted into a movie, starring Brad Pitt, that gave fly-fishing its broadest exposure and presented a vision of the pastime that continues to dominate today.

Fairly or not, fly-fishing has often been viewed as the province of the affluent, perhaps because it has, for 160 years, most commonly been represented by Orvis, the Vermont-based lifestyle brand that also peddles \$350 memory foam dog beds. Enhancing the reputation is the fact that fly-fishing was, and still is, often practiced at exclusive, private trout clubs, which buy land along streams and restrict them to their members alone.

From the beginning, Flechsig pushed back against the exclusiveness of the sport, says Kelly Galloup, an old friend and one of Flechsig’s earliest mentors. Galloup, who runs a fly shop and guide service on Montana’s Madison River, started his career half a century ago in Michigan, when trout and salmon were the only fish worthy of pursuit, and the dry fly was the only fly a respectable fly angler would tie on the end of his line.

Galloup says Flechsig “met with disfavor” in some quarters when he began hawking flies and tackle aimed at catching bass, pike, muskie and—the horror—carp. “He was smart enough to understand that people like to just go fish,” Galloup says. “Sure, everyone wants to see a fish come to a dry fly. But smallmouth bass are almost identical to trout when it comes to fight. They’re ambushers. And guys might not tell their friends at the trout club that they had fun carp-fishing, but it’s a blast.”

How Flechsig got hooked

Flechsig spent his childhood in St. Louis, at the junction of two great American rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri. He grew up in a family of fishermen and jazz musicians, with a father who made his living in market research.

“My childhood was spent watching television commercials. Dad would come home and get out the movie projector and play commercials for Purina Dog Chow, and then he’d say, ‘What do you remember from that? Do you remember the brand name?’ I may have picked up that gene.”

At age 7, using a fly he’d tied himself, Flechsig caught his first fish on a fly rod, fishing on Missouri’s Big River with his uncle. A year later, his father bought a bass boat, and nearly every weekend was spent fishing. Flechsig fished mostly with a spinning rod until the family relocated to Cincinnati when Brian was 13 and he discovered the Mad River, a spring-fed stream that runs through farmland and small towns in West-Central Ohio, from Bellefontaine to its confluence with the Great Miami River in Dayton.

The cold-water springs that feed the Mad make it one of the few streams in Ohio capable of supporting trout. The Ohio Division of Wildlife has been stocking it, off and on, for more than 90 years. Flechsig took up fly-fishing with gusto, so much so that it changed his career trajectory.

After high school, he enrolled in the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, where he studied jazz guitar, following in the footsteps of uncles who had played with some of the biggest names in big bands. “Jazz seemed to be my destiny. But I was too far into The Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead and then bluegrass.” He dropped the guitar and took up the mandolin, quit school and was managing a music store in Cincinnati when another influence proved stronger than

rock 'n' roll or bluegrass. In 1990, the owner of a Cincinnati fly shop, Ryan's Streamside Outfitters, offered him a job. He worked the shop and then began hosting trips, escorting clients to the Pere Marquette River in Michigan, chasing trout, steelhead and salmon.

On his early trips, he met Galloup, who is 10 years older and remembers being impressed by the 20-something's calm demeanor and attention to detail—key vocational traits when organizing a trip of anglers who may fish only a few times a year but are paying top dollar for a destination voyage. “When you're bringing clients on a trip like that, you have to have everything they need when they get there,” Galloup says. “You have to be sure their equipment is matched, the clothing is down, the rods are right. You have to be marriage counselor and bartender, and you have to make sure they don't get hypothermia and they don't drown.”

Flechsig seemed to understand those needs instinctively, Galloup says, and his detailed preparations allowed him to maintain his generally serene demeanor. “I've never seen Brian get worked up over anything. I mean anything. And that has a calming effect on everyone.”

Within a few years, Flechsig was ready to set off on his own, and in his short time at the Cincinnati shop he'd impressed the representatives at Orvis. In 1994, he rented about 1,700 square feet at Olentangy Plaza and opened a full-line Orvis shop. As the young owner of a fly shop in the heart of Ohio, he heard from the skeptics almost immediately, but Flechsig remained confident in his business' potential.

“The thing a lot of people don't seem to understand is that fish don't buy fishing equipment,” he says. “There are tons of people in Ohio interested in Montana and Colorado trout. But are you going to get on a plane in Columbus with no waders, no rod, with nothing, and expect to find it there? No, you're going to buy it in Columbus, or Chicago, or St. Louis, or New York. When you get out there, you're going to buy some flies and maybe a leader or tippet.”

From the beginning, MRO focused on education. There were casting and fly-tying classes and how-to videos, all aimed at simplifying, demystifying and popularizing fly-fishing for all. “He recognizes that in order for him to be successful, he's got to help people love the sport and his business will come along with that,” says Ross Evans, national sales manager for

Texas-based TFO Rods (previously known as Temple Fork Outfitters). “So many retailers in the outdoor space forget that important piece.

“He’s as big an influence in the industry as it gets. And he’s done that even though he’s as geographically handicapped as any retailer in the country. He’s not sitting in the Rockies. Not sitting in Key West. He’s not sitting in some fly-fishing mecca in Oregon. He’s in Columbus, Ohio.”

One can imagine Flechsig bristling a bit at this praise. Ever the salesman, he likes to point out the proximity of Columbus to popular trout spots like the Smoky Mountains, Pennsylvania’s limestone streams, Michigan’s salmon runs. Not to mention the aquatic diversity in Ohio’s lakes and streams.

Well, sure, Evans says, but unlike an urban shop in say, Denver, or Bozeman, or Portland, where the number of fly-rod cases might outnumber golf clubs on an airport baggage carousel in summer, Central Ohio isn’t steeped in fly-fishing culture and doesn’t have the critical mass to drive the market.

“He has instinctively known that to be successful, he needed to build that. The fly industry gets a bad rap, and sometimes it’s a deserved rap, that it can be its own worst enemy because it can, at times, be snooty,” Evans says. “Brian doesn’t care if you can spend \$1,000 on a fly rod or \$50. He just wants you to go fishing.”

'It's not that complicated'

And so, in a state with mostly warm-water streams, where salmonids are limited to a few stocked trout streams and the steelhead in a few Lake Erie tributaries, you fish for bass, muskie, pike and carp. Over the years, the business grew—in the shop and, eventually, online.

To Flechsig, it’s simply good business to know your customers and make them comfortable. From his earliest videos, back in the 1990s, he’s tried to dispel the idea that fly-fishing is difficult to learn and expensive to practice. Today, at 53, as the collar-length hair that splays out a bit wildly from an ever-present ball cap is graying, he’s more direct than he was in his how-to videos.

“It’s the industry that has created those misconceptions. Because the industry is filled with egomaniacs that want you to believe that it’s rocket science. They write books and make videos to boost their own egos and make it sound like it’s complicated. It’s not that complicated.”

Like most full-service fly shops, MRO looks a bit like a joint venture between a tackle shop, an outdoor apparel boutique and a craft store. Long ago expanding from Orvis to include other brands, the store carries rods and reels and fly line, boots and waders from Simms, Orvis, Patagonia and Fishpond. There are fishing vests and Tilley hats, a variety of stylish outdoor clothing brands, and many racks of colorful stuff for the making of fishing flies: feathers and fur, fishhooks and wire, and yarn, beads and buggy eyes. The staff is friendly and knowledgeable and can tell you what you need if you plan to fish for steelhead in Ohio or for tarpon in the Bahamas.

The store’s video studio can be found in a small corner in the shop’s backroom. This is where Flechsig is filmed answering emails from all over the country, drawing sketches on a whiteboard to illustrate his lessons. In 2017, MRO hired Dev Fogle, an independent videographer who brought a youthful whimsy to Flechsig’s wry humor and Midwestern affability, on display going back to his pre-internet 1990s instructional videos. “We set ourselves apart by not taking ourselves too seriously,” says Fogle, who doesn’t fish.

One series of episodes, called the “Five Minute Fly Tying Challenge,” embraces the comedic tone of Good Mythical Morning, a YouTube favorite of Fogle’s. In these shows, MRO staffers take turns with a basket of random fly-tying material and have five minutes to create a fly. “Brian is a natural teacher and entertainer,” says Linda Farner, the shop’s soft goods manager. “But Dev is the man behind the quirky.”

The MRO YouTube channel now has 176,000 subscribers. “Not Justin Bieber numbers,” Flechsig acknowledges, but more subscribers than can be claimed by Orvis and Bass Pro Shops combined. The first episode of “Getting Started in Fly Fishing,” has tallied nearly 1.3 million views, and the monthly views come from as far away as New Zealand and South Africa.

“I tell him he’s a cult leader,” says Farner, who was hired 11 years ago to expand the shop’s line of women’s apparel. “A guy called the other day with a question, and we handed the phone to Brian. The guy’s wife wouldn’t believe he was actually

talking to the guy on the videos. She emailed later, to thank us for making her husband's day.”

Josh McQueen, one of two full-time guides for MRO and manager of the company's guide service, says “everything changed when our YouTube started to take off.” McQueen, a former truck driver from Utica, Ohio, who, like many MRO staff, was first a customer of the store, is featured in many of the videos and is now recognized in public, a reality that he finds “a little wild.”

It also helps him earn a living from fly-fishing. MRO charges nearly \$400 for a day of wade-fishing with one of its guides, more if you use a boat. McQueen is booked at least 300 days out of every year, nearly all of it on Ohio rivers and lakes. He has been building that clientele for a decade, but he says he now has customers who specifically seek him out after watching him on YouTube. Some of his repeat clients come from as far away as Chicago and Los Angeles.

The downside of success

With a growing YouTube audience and a well-oiled online marketing platform, MRO was well-positioned for a turn of events that the staff didn't anticipate. The COVID pandemic, a disaster for many businesses, turned out to be a boon for retailers who sold anything that helped people get outdoors, from bicycles to patio furniture to fishing tackle. The fly-fishing industry, says TRO's Evans, has witnessed the greatest growth since “A River Runs Through It” was released on the big screen, sending fly novices flocking to western Montana.

Flechsig is a bit uncomfortable discussing the effect of the pandemic on his business. “Because, you know, people died. And a lot of businesses shut down. So I don't like to talk about it, but yeah, for us it was huge.”

Now, more than 90 percent of MRO's inventory is sold online, but that doesn't make the shop any less important to the business, Farner says. “We have a lot of people come in to see the store. Sometimes they want to have their picture taken with Brian. We've become a destination.”

There's a cautionary tale, though, in the story of MRO's success. Between building a YouTube following, learning about Google Analytics and long-tail keywords, and answering emails seven days a week, Flechsig has stopped fishing for fun. “In

the 11 years I've worked for the man, I've known him to take one vacation for himself," Farner says. "Oh, he takes these fabulous trips to Alaska and Brazil, but he's working hard on those trips."

Flechsig doesn't deny it. "I rarely fish when I don't have a camera running behind me," he admits. And although he once played bluegrass with several local bands, he hasn't picked up his mandolin in 10 years.

"Yeah, it kind of sucks," he says, sitting in the cockpit of his shiny new bass boat. "I enjoy being good at what I do and seeing my business succeed. I employ a lot of people who depend on their paycheck. And I was broke for many, many years, and didn't enjoy being broke.

"But from a fisherman's standpoint, I'd like to retire, and go fishing."

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