

'Sure, kid, we can go fishing.' How these two men connect fly fishing eras

Brian Whipkey Pennsylvania Outdoors Columnist

Published 10:00 p.m. ET Aug. 24, 2022 | Updated 4:28 p.m. ET Aug. 31, 2022

BOALSBURG – Two legendary fly anglers anticipate a bright future for the sport they enjoy introducing to others.

George Daniel and Joe Humphreys have educated and inspired thousands of people about fly fishing through classroom instruction, books and videos.

Daniel is the director and lead instructor for the [Pennsylvania State University Fly Fishing Program](#) that was named after Humphreys, who is still working on fly fishing books at 93.

I spent an August morning with the two at Humphreys' home along Spring Creek in Centre County to learn about the past and what they anticipate about the future of their beloved sport.

Fly-fishing know-how

Daniel, 43, of Lock Haven, has competed in five world championships. Humphreys has also competed in the world championships and was inducted into the [Fly Fishing Hall of Fame](#) in 2013. It's not his only hall honor; he was inducted into the [National Wrestling Hall of Fame](#) in 2012.

Humphreys led the fly fishing program at Penn State for 19 years, and the university changed its name in January to the Joe Humphreys Fly Fishing Program in recognition of his contributions, teaching and half a century of advocacy and fundraising. "It was such an honor for me," Humphreys said. "I was thinking 'How could this happen?' and I was so grateful."

You should fish here: [Here's a close look at the best bass waters in Pennsylvania](#)

Between them Humphreys and Daniel have published six books, and Humphreys is credited with hosting the first national fly-fishing TV show, on ESPN.

Humphreys became a mentor to Daniel and the two have educated people about the sport and conservation.

“George is doing a wonderful job, I’m so proud of him,” Humphreys said about Daniel's leadership.

More than just fishing

Penn State students can take his Principles and Practices of Fly Fishing for Trout, Multi-Cultural Introduction to Fly Fishing and a Masters of Fly Fishing Class.

This semester, part of the curriculum involves stream clean-up and stream enhancement with a local Trout Unlimited chapter and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

“There’s definitely that component of giving back to the community and just working with the community and giving the kids some experience understanding about what these trout streams, especially in urban environments like this, they need help, they need protection,” Daniel said. “That’s the advantage we have is that we can get these kids fishing and get them excited about that with the hopes of not only catching fish but also creating future stewards of the resource.”

He said that’s one of the top two goals of the program in the Department of Kinesiology, the other being mental wellness.

“Social media and technology definitely is creating anxiety and a whole level of problems that I can’t explain.” Daniel’s classes are an escape. “It’s a smartphone-free zone. For the first one or two classes we have, you can tell, it’s like detox, they are antsy and they’re moving around. But what we get into immediately are the tactile things, the fly-tying, the knot-tying. Before you know it, they will tell you, it’s the only time, the three-hour class of their week, that they are not worried about their peers, exams or social problems. They tell you it’s like therapy for them.”

What you need to know about bass: [Three experts highlight best opportunities to catch bass in Pennsylvania](#)

The curriculum isn't just for those who have a background in fishing. "About 95% of the kids who take my class have zero fishing experience," Daniel said.

Artistic people register to try tying flies. Others sign up to learn the sport. Some students are looking for careers in the outdoors industry. There are seven classes that have 25 students in each – and there's a waiting list.

Daniel is working to maintain the values and core principles that George Harvey, the creator of the university's fly fishing program in 1934, and Humphreys have championed, but also to provide more outreach.

Trophy catches: [Several record breakers top list of the 2021 PA Angler Awards Program](#)

"The program is so historic," he said. "It's a great program that Joe (Humphreys) and George (Harvey) created."

The future of fishing

Daniel is optimistic about trout fishing in Pennsylvania. He said the Fish and Boat Commission has been focusing on resources to support aquatic life. It is purchasing property for angler access and spending to enhance habitat. "When you have the water quality and you have the habitat and the right regulations, you will develop kind of a self-sustaining population," he said about seeing more wild and native trout streams.

Go fly fishing: [2 experts explain why you should fly fish as well](#)

Conservation has been a priority for Daniel and Humphreys alike.

Humphreys recalls when in the 1970s, during a highway project, sewage flowed into his favorite waters of Spring Creek and trout died. "This can't be, they can't do this to Spring Creek," he said. "We're going to bring it back." He and five other volunteers started the group that became the [Spring Creek Chapter of Trout Unlimited](#), and they were successful in diverting the pollution, restoring the water quality to Spring Creek. "It's one thing I want to be remembered for," Humphreys said. "We gave it new life."

Daniel said having a fly fishing career is something he'd wanted since his childhood.

“I was just hooked. There is just something about fly fishing,” he said. “There’s always a puzzle to solve.

“You have a challenge, you approach that challenge with tackle and flies that you tie. Sometimes you catch, and sometimes you don’t. But when you do, it basically connects you, it’s kind of like sealing the bond,” he said.

Fly fishing requires focus and determination.

“It’s still a skill – it’s not hard, but it can be hard – but it just requires work,” Daniel said. “There’s a correlation between effort and output. If you don’t put in the work, you can do all the research, you can be a YouTube or web search expert, but if you don’t put the work in, you’re not going to get the result you’re looking for most of the time.”

With Daniel’s expertise, he could live and work wherever he desires. “That’s what makes central Pennsylvania so great,” he said. “I’ve had opportunities to move all across the country. The reason why I like it here is because of the fishing opportunities for both trout and warmwater species like bass.”

Even though they were born a half century apart, both men grew up fishing in streams near their homes in central Pennsylvania and found their inspiration in books written about fly fishing.

Where it began

Daniel grew up in rural Germania, Potter County, fishing for native brook trout on Germania Branch, a tributary of Kettle Creek. “My father introduced me to fly fishing when I was 6, but he was kind of impatient.”

Several years later his family moved to the Lock Haven area and he started fishing and reading about Harvey and Humphreys. “When I was 14, for Christmas my mom got me two books, and that was George Harvey’s book on fly fishing and Joe’s book on trout tactics.”

Waterway improvements underway: [Almost \\$90 million worth of lake improvements are planned across Pennsylvania](#)

When he started reading about the two college fly-fishing instructors, he realized he’d found his life’s calling.

“Ever since then, family members, friends thought I was crazy because I had this singular focus,” Daniel said. “But all I wanted to do was become as good of an angler and more importantly become as good of a teacher as possible.”

Daniel encountered Humphreys at a clinic at a local fly shop. “I had already bought his book at that point and had like 25 bucks in my pocket, but I knew I had to find a way to strike up a conversation with Joe, so I picked up another copy of Joe’s book. I only had \$25 and needed money to get back for gas. I was running on 'E.' So I grabbed the book and went up to Joe.”

He asked Humphreys if he would sign the book. “He was very patient, very graceful and sat down at the table and he signed the book for me; still I have that copy.”

Daniel built up the courage to ask if Humphreys would take him fishing some time. “‘Sure kid,’” he said, “‘we can go fishing some time.’ And I held him to his promise.”

Daniel remembers that he called his hero most days for the next year. Humphreys' wife, Gloria, would often answer. “‘It’s that kid again, Joe.’”

“And then he finally gave in. He took me fishing and we kind of hit it off and he took me under his wing.”

Late summer trout: [Summer is a fine time in Pennsylvania to catch trout](#)

He remembers watching Humphreys fish. “I was in awe,” Daniel said, watching the books he'd read come to life. “He lived and breathed what he wrote. It was pretty much having my expectations met and surpassed.”

Humphreys came to realize Daniel’s mutual passion for fly fishing and would share the information from his public programs and slides. “For me that was awesome,” Daniel said. “It was like watching Steven Spielberg release 'Indiana Jones' or George Lucas release 'Star Wars.’”

Humphreys would explain his talking points and how he would teach the information. “My fishing idol and my fishing hero was going over his new programs with *me*,” Daniel recalled.

They spent time together in the field and on the water, but “one of the best things he did for me was give me encouragement,” Daniel said. “When you have someone that you look up to,

and they encourage you and mold you, I think that is a very powerful tool. And that's continued on until present day."

After graduate school, Daniel earned his way onto the U.S. Fly Fishing Team, and he credits Humphreys for helping him fine-tune his teaching and presentation skills. In December 2019, Penn State named Daniel the lead instructor and director of its fly fishing program.

"If I had one man to do the job for me, it's George," Humphreys said, anticipating a bright future for the program.

Daniel is looking forward to expanding the university's offerings and hopes they will be able to bring in a second instructor. He has started more outreach through Zoom presentations for friends and family of the program.

New president's agenda: [PFBC president looks forward to more fishing opportunities](#)

He's also providing lectures for the public and creating a broader social media presence. People are sharing photos and experiences with the hashtag #joehumphreysflyingprogram.

Humphreys would like Daniel to have funding to take his class fishing to inspiring places, like the Bahamas, during class breaks. "Wouldn't that be neat? What an experience for a kid," he said.

Humphreys' early years

Humphreys was born in 1929 in Curwensville, Clearfield County. Money was tight and work difficult to find during the Great Depression, and his family moved to State College. His father, James, found a job at Penn State, but "life was tough," Humphreys recalled.

But it was there he learned to fish. He holds a photo of the first time his father took him fishing, around the age of 7 or 8, in the waterway that is now the Benner Spring State Hatchery. "Neither of us knew anything about fishing."

With a gleam in his eyes, Humphreys recalls feeling a tug on his line, pulling on the line and yanking a trout onto the bank.

"That was the start of it. I was so mesmerized by that fish," he said. The spots on the native brook trout were beautiful and he remembers his mother, Ruth, preparing their catch for

sandwiches. “It was the best sandwich I’ve ever eaten. I’ve never had a sandwich since then that was ever that good.”

Fish more remotely: [As e-bike use grows, Pennsylvania looks to accommodate riders in state parks, forests](#)

He learned to tie basic flies and tried different techniques to imitate hatches he'd see on the water. “My father made a concoction of paraffin and gasoline and we floated our flies,” he said. It stained their clothes, and they smelled like gasoline. “But it worked.”

He eventually was able to get to a store and buy dry flies for 15 cents each. “That was a lot of money to me,” he said.

Humphreys had an unforgettable experience with those store-bought flies one morning near a pasture field. “On the back cast with one of my 15-cent flies, I hooked a cow. There was a herd of cows and I hooked this damn cow, and I chased him and it kept running. The more I chased, the faster he took off, and I lost my fly. I never did get it.”

Humphreys enjoyed learning how trout fed. He discovered freshwater shrimp along a stream, went home and created flies with orange sewing thread to imitate the shrimp. “I was so excited,” he said when a large trout grabbed his creation. “I was singing to the top of my lungs the whole way home because I captured that trout. That was really the first fish I caught on a nymph,” he said about what's become a lifelong obsession with nymphing.

More fish: [National organization improves fish habitat in Pennsylvania waterways](#)

Like Daniel, the pages of a book he received for Christmas in 1941 helped Humphreys realize how fishing would define his life.

“I became enamored with it,” Humphreys said of Ray Bergman's “Just Fishing.” “I was reading this and was just into it.”

In school he wrote about brown trout and finding success. “This book gave me a start. I could see myself as Ray Bergman.”

If he wanted to improve his tactics, he did it through trial and error. For example, he fished with Lester Kerstetter, who was a great minnow fisherman. He adjusted his fly fishing rig

with monofilament like Kerstetter. "I was getting down deeper than I ever had before and was taking fish I could never catch before."

Invasive species watch: [Traces of silver carp, an invasive species, found in Presque Isle Bay. What's the next step?](#)

The technique spread across the fishing industry, but he said some felt monofilament wasn't a true fly line. So he worked with an engineer at Cortland on what became Joe Humphreys' Nymphing Set, a thinner floating fly line that makes the difference for this style of fishing.

More than catching fish

Fishing is about experiences, memories and living in the moment, Humphreys said.

"When I'm working with people on a stream, and I've guided a multitude of people, at one stage of the game when they are concentrating on trying to catch a fish, I'll say to them 'Look up, just stop, look up. Look at those clouds, aren't they beautiful? Look, there's two red-winged blackbirds. Look at them, aren't they beautiful? Look at the reflections of the water, or look at how that riffle is dancing.' So I say this is God's world and I say 'Hey, enjoy it, but appreciate it, and take the time to appreciate it,' but they don't. They get caught up in everything else."

Of all the places Humphreys has fished including Finland, Wales and Portugal, where he earned a bronze medal in the world championship, he said his favorite waterway is near his home in Spring Creek that holds so many memories. "They are legendary, they are golden," he said, recalling rising fish and hatches.

He said when someone sees him sitting there smiling, he wants people to know he's reliving a memory of standing along a pool of water catching trout.

Sign up for outdoor news: [Go Outdoors PA free newsletter](#)

However, he's not ready to hang up his rod and reel. He's still teaching others. He's working on a book about mountain stream fishing techniques and is spending time along the water for the photography.

"I'm not done," he said. "I'm still going."

Brian Whipkey is the outdoors columnist for USA TODAY Network sites in Pennsylvania. Contact him at bwhipkey@gannett.com and sign up for our weekly Go Outdoors PA newsletter email on your website's homepage under your login name. Follow him on social media @whipkeyoutdoors.