

Clearwater Fly Casters

Dave Engerbretson

Longtime friend offers farewell to fly-fishing icon

By Charlie Powell

Gary Borger called from Thailand; Gene Trump from his cartoonist desk in Oregon, Peter Harriman rang in too, from his assignment desk at the Argus-Leader newspaper in South Dakota. One by one, many of the world's great fly anglers, tiers, and authorities have offered their condolences for last week's loss of our good friend, Dave Engerbretson.

Even Paul Harvey's national radio broadcast noted his passing as did National Public Radio. Add to the recognizable names, legions of friends, family, and former students who feel a loss and one gets the idea of the scope of a man like Dave.

Dave was a unique and increasingly rare individual who paddled out on a recreation-hungry ocean after World War II as an Eagle Scout, caught the first good wave of post-war outdoor journalism, and rode it all the way back in to the beach, never looking back. From Backpacker's Journal to these very pages, Dave wrote for many of the best over the years.

Academically, he conquered the stuffiness of self-aggrandized college administrators by researching and publishing some of the most often cited literature in recreation. His academic and lay publications range from such diverse topics as fly rod action to the competent introduction of children to outdoor pursuits.

Almost three decades ago he took up where boxing legend Ike Deeter left off with a regular fishing course, and transformed it into fly fishing for the masses. In 1997, I was flattered to be asked to take over teaching his course in WSU's College of Education.

Dave and Ike's course is one of the oldest continuous running for-credit fishing courses available in U.S. institutions of higher education. Last year, The Daily Evergreen student newspaper ranked PEACT 266's popularity as one of the courses considered "too hot for the catalog." This fall the tradition continues with the able assistance of Jim Palmersheim and John Toker joining me and 25 students in Martin Stadium.

Dave and fly-tying master, LeRoy Hyatt, co-hosted the very popular PBS television series, "Fly-tying; The Angler's Art," seen nationwide. Dave had battled failing health in recent years

much like John Wayne kicked lung cancer's ass and went on making movies for another 15 years. The show was a bit of a ruse to cover Dave's failing eyesight by having LeRoy tie and Dave and LeRoy discuss each pattern. The ruse worked and few in the viewing audience ever knew.

His devoted wife of more than 22 years, Shirley, and I sat down this week with a scrapbook assembled by Dave's mother. In it were yellowed newspaper articles showing a young, handsome, and vibrant man tossing the caber at Macalester College, leading the Highland Pipers, and on, and on.

Anecdotes about Dave abound, and I've heard plenty from long-faced mourners this week. Daily News pet and travel columnist May Ellen Gorham said she'd taken Dave's fly-fishing course many years ago, not because she was interested in fishing, but because, "he was so Goddamned good looking."

Harriman recalled Dave's indomitable spirit for survival. "He, unlike anyone else I've ever met, always thought of the glass as half-full," Harriman said. "And damned if he wouldn't pull out of some huge medical crisis to go on and accomplish even more."

He also recalled the loud, but friendly, arguments Dave and sports columnist Harry Missildine would get into over God knows what subjects during weekly games of pool in Dave's basement. Dave enjoyed a good set-to and once challenged a sporting goods retailer in print to prove his tiny, trendy swim fins could out-power (as advertised) a set of long fins Dave got from Jacques Cousteau when used with a float tube. The retailer never showed at Spring Valley Reservoir to take him up on the challenge and Dave never gloated.

An accomplished exercise scientist and anatomist, Dave was a member emeritus of the American College of Sports Medicine. He knew how the human body worked and better yet, he knew how it played.

He had a sharp but corny wit and truly loved double entendres and plays on words. I once sat down with him in the Moscow Hotel over a beer and listened to endless Sven and Ollie jokes memorized from his Minnesota youth. His friends and family also sat with him this spring as

he enjoyed his other passion, live jazz, at the Lionel Hampton Festival.

All this started to deteriorate fast in the last few months and Dave knew full well what the future held for him. He and Shirley planned for him to die at home. He knew the burden would be great for her to care for him and he privately confessed his sorrow and guilt for that to me in his office while he sat in a wheelchair. I told him we forgave him.

Two weeks before he died, he called me to his home at about 10 o'clock one evening. In tears, he gave me a handmade card and told me I was like the brother he never had. He also handed me his first fly box and told me its history. He made me promise to use it, not display it on some shelf.

Dave professed his love to his family and all his close friends similarly, not the least of which was local artist Jim Palmersheim, who often cared for Dave until he passed. His love for Shirley could fill another huge column.

How many guys do you know who give their wives multiple cards for their birthday and anniversary? Dave did, and many were handmade. He loved being in love with her.

Later that week, I called him one evening while standing in the Henry's Fork near where he used to guide. I described the scene before me. I held the phone near the water and let him hear its rush. I named the insects coming off. He urged me to cross the river and fish the far side about 100 yards above where I was with a different fly. I did. I caught fish when no one else was.

Last Monday night he called us all, weak and slightly confused. He knew the end was near. Jim sat with him and watched the Mariners game Tuesday night as the fluid backed up from a failing heart and crept from his legs to his abdomen and finally into his chest. He told Shirley he knew this was how his end would come and like so often, Dave was right.

Goodbye, my friend.

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