

MOVING FISH

MAKES MEMORABLE FLATS PREP SCHOOL

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It's a harsh fact of fly fishing: When an inexperienced fly angler takes a flats fishing trip without first knowing flats procedure or possessing flats skills, the experience can be a joyless one, for both the guide and the fly flinger. In fact, fly fishing tales abound of infamous saltwater guides who threaten inexperienced "sports" with the end of a push-pole after their charters repeatedly blow shots at good fish.

Ideally, there should always be good communication and teamwork between the angler and guide. But how does one gain flats fishing skill and knowledge without actually chartering flats trips, and thus incurring the ire of pro flats guides? To those ends, in the fall of 2012, I was brainstorming on the phone about indoor winter instruction with friend and fishing legend Lou Tabory.

We came up with the idea of an indoor flats school to prepare anglers for their first Spring flats trip, or a review and warm-up for more experienced flats fishermen. I also tapped into the experience and innovation of Tony Vitale, who with his wife Marilyn, run KCS Fly Fishing School in Washington State, USA. Tony told me about his unique method for teaching bonefish fishing. He places his students on a pretend boat deck that he rocks with 2 x 4 levers and presents movable bonefish as targets!





Memorable Flats Prep School *continued ...*

Tony's innovative instruction reminded me of a technique used by Gordy Hill and Jim Valle at the 2004 IFFF Expo. During a class on flats fishing, given on real grass, Gordy was on a stepladder (as if he were poling) and Jim was in front, 'on the casting deck,' with his rod loaded. I'm sure they placed a casting target for Jim to cast to.

I incorporated ideas from all of these experienced anglers and instructors into what I call '**Flats Prep School**.' I also added a few ideas of my own, including a moveable target fish, which I mount on the back of a radio-controlled truck, which gives my students a moving target to cast to. Here's how it came about.

For my prototype fish I found a lifelike rubber shark and spray painted the back with black paint. Then I bought a highly recommended radio controlled truck. I took a safety razor and cut down the polycarbonate truck body to accommodate the rubber shark. It was like a cradle. I fixed the fish to the truck using flexible little bungee cords. It was a blast to operate.

To simulate a boat bow, I use the casting platform from my flats skiff, so students get a real feel for size and stability. I use a 6-foot platform ladder to simulate a poling platform and run the RC controls from there.

After thoroughly testing my flats boat simulation, I put together my school lesson plans. They are crafted for beginner and intermediate saltwater students.

In the first four-week segment of the school titled - Intro Thru Intermediate Level, I teach a one-hour class on each of the following:

- Pick-up-and-lay-down and roll casts
- Loop control and false casting
- Extending or shortening line
- Accuracy and presentation basics
- Shooting line, hauling and distance casting

In the second four-week segment titled **Flats Fly Fishing Prep**, requires students to have intermediate level skills. It teaches more advanced students about flats sight fishing.

In these classes I offered one-hour classes on

- Loop control and double-haul review
- Casting - in winds, distance casting, saltwater quick-casts and accuracy
- Guide direction - casting the clock, leading fish, retrieves and fighting fish.

After every class I advise each student what to practice before the next class. In these classes, I charge per class, instead of by the bloc of four or eight classes. That allows students to pick and choose. I might reconsider that in the future, though, since having money on the line does improve follow-through.

Finding a venue for the classes took more effort than I imagined. In the end, I found a field house with artificial grass, 100 x 90 feet. The field house was great because they kept the temperature in the high 70's F when it's 20° F outside. Once the venue was secured, I bought insurance.

Memorable Flats Prep School *continued...*

The first year, I didn't advertise in the media; I wanted to work out the bugs first. To get the word out, I sent notices to local fly shops and fishing clubs. I also contacted one of the biggest angling travel agencies in the country, which happens to be in Connecticut, to ask them for a trip discount coupon for my students. I made a full-color brochure with the coupon incorporated in the design and handed them out at The Fly Fishing Show in two cities.

I enlisted a talented young guide and instructor named Kevney Moses to help as assistant instructor. A second instructor can give students mini-lessons on the sidelines –work their stroke or hauls. I even asked if he would lead a few times and he did a great job. We had a steady turnout of five or six students, and they made good progress through the weeks. Everyone may bring their own rod and I provide a variety of 8- to 12-wts, in case someone wants to cast a heavier outfit.

After explaining and demonstrating a task, I have the students cast parallel to each other, like golfers on a driving range. Kevney and I visit with each student and check technique and coach as necessary. After acquiring all the necessary skills, the students are ready for the simulation.

On the last class, I operate the RC fish target. The students really enjoy it. If there are no soccer workshops, we can open the huge partitions in the field house to provide us a 270 x 100 foot working area. I give instructions just as though I were a guide on the poling platform. . . "laid-up tarpon at 10 o'clock...sixty feet...lead 'em 10 feet, go and past his nose three feet!" and "cast! ,now -- long strips!" Students say the simulation feels very realistic, except there are no wobbly knees as in real-life on-the-water fishing.

I've had so much interest in this class that I'm going to give the ***Flats Prep Workshop*** at the IFFF Fly Fishing Fair in Livingston this year. I'm working with a taxidermist to make a flexible bonefish using a mold from a real fish.

Livingston doesn't have an indoor venue for me, but I hope it's a nice windy day so I can add more realism to my class.



*About the author: **John Field** is a **IFFF Certified Master Casting Instructor** with over forty years fly fishing experience. He is past president of the American Casting Association, the New York City Chapter of Trout Unlimited and writes about fly fishing. He and his family live in Weston, CT.*