

LEFTY

WHEN YOU FIRST meet Bernard "Lefty" Kreh, you get the feeling you've encountered an old friend. He greets you with such warmth and sincere interest that you are instantly at ease and comfortable. And an

introduction to this popular angler often carries over to a lifetime of friendship. All that's required by Kreh is that you be yourself. The things that count with him are integrity, loyalty, and an ability to laugh at yourself. He despises phonies—those filled with their own self-importance—and "around-the-bend" fishermen, one who claims more fish than he actually caught.

Bald as a newborn baby, Lefty has clear blue Santa Claus eyes that take in everything. He is often mistaken for Joe Garagiola, the NBC sports announcer and former catcher for the St. Louis Cardinals. The resemblance in both build and features is close enough to cause some confused sports fans to ask him for Garagiola's autograph.

Kreh, the storyteller, is in such demand for casting demonstrations, slide shows, photography clinics, and lectures that his schedule is set a year or more in advance. Of all vaudevillians in the fishing world, his is the best act in town. It is not only his fishing knowledge but his camaraderie coupled with humor that ensures innumerable return engagements. Members of fishing clubs fight for the right to pick him up at the airport, knowing they will be treated to a nonstop session of storytelling and ethnic jokes until it's time for him to leave. Even nonangler guests enjoy the performance. As one "civilian" remarked, "I don't know a thing about fishing, but I had a hell of a good time."

Lefty is unique, and word gets around, and so does Lefty. He has fished in waters both fresh and salt in nearly every corner of the world. He has wet a line

with dukes and earls, kings and presidents, and those in prominent position everywhere. Yet he is unfazed by it all. "People are just people," he says, "and I like just about everyone I meet. . . . I think you have to believe that everyone is okay unless they prove other-

wise. That doesn't mean we don't have faults. We all do, but you have to take people as they are . . . unless they're out to screw you. Fortunately, the stinkers are few and far between."

Lefty, the practical joker, has grown cautious and is always on the lookout for a set-up. When you call him on the phone, the voice is not the resounding tenor that carries to the rear seats, but soft, and purring, like a cat lying low, wary of a trap, or, if he recognizes your voice, ready to pounce with a one-liner that may make you forget why you called in the first place. One caller, wise to the Kreh attack and defense code, disguised his own voice and said, "Mr. Kreh?"

"Yes?" Lefty replied.

"This is Joe Wolyniec. I'm with the Polish Anti-defamation League."

Silence. Then realization.

"You son of a b____, who is this?"

FREDERICK, MARYLAND, where Kreh was born in 1925, was, at best, a town of modest means even before the Great Depression. When his father died in 1932, the family, which included his two brothers, sister, and mother, went on welfare. Rent and food were assured to some extent, but that was all. "When you were really poor," says Kreh, "everyone knew it. At Christmas time a well-intentioned group of citizens formed what was called 'The Empty-stockng Club.' They would see to it that those kids who had nothing got a rebuilt toy and a Christmas card. Then they put our picture in the paper."

"Lefty, the practical joker, has grown cautious and is always on the lookout for a set-up"

ERIC LEISER



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO
Lefty Kreh: angler, author, outdoorsman, and fly-fishing instructor to children (inset) and adults.



LEFTY KREH PHOTO

By the time he was eight, Kreh had begun to improve his lot by using an outlet with which he still makes his living today—fishing. But in those days no rods were involved. “I used to dig freshwater mussels from the nearby Monocacy River and go bush bobbing. I’d tie a line to branches hung over the water with the baited hook just below the surface. At night the catfish would go on the prowl, and by morning I’d have 10 to 20, all worn out from fighting limbs. Catfish went for ten cents a pound. I made more money than any other kid in town, and sometimes, more than a guy working a steady job.”

The years spent at Frederick High School were probably as trying for his teachers as they were for Lefty. “They said I’d never amount to much,” he says, “primarily because of my lack of interest. They were partly right. I just couldn’t get enthused. My mind was always on fishing and hunting and playing basketball.” It was while playing basketball that Kreh received the nickname “Lefty.” Because of his short height he played guard, and he prided himself on his peripheral vision and the ability to pass the ball in one direction while looking in another. “I used to drive and fake with my right hand, then turn and shoot with my left,” he says. Kreh is ambidextrous, able to perform many functions using either hand.

In World War II Kreh served as an Army forward observer with the 69th Division in France, Belgium, and Germany. Recalling the experience, he says, “It was one of the two worst jobs in the Army, the other being a tail gunner in a B-17. We had to position ourselves in front of the infantry and direct fire on the target. That made us *their prime target*. Of the 12 of us who went over there only four came back, and every one of those four was wounded.”

Kreh has five battle stars, including one for the Battle of the Bulge, and was awarded the Purple Heart. He recalls that the best day of his life was the day he was discharged.

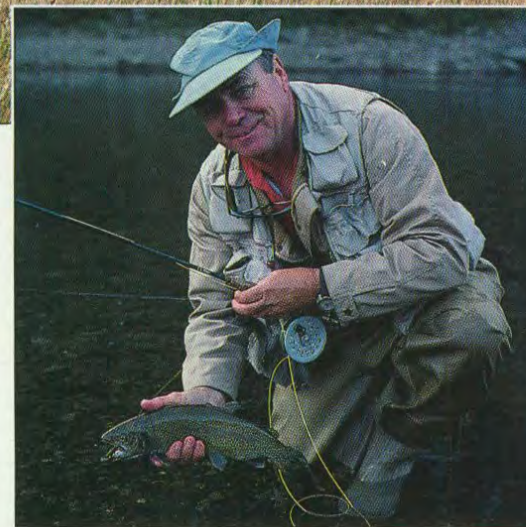
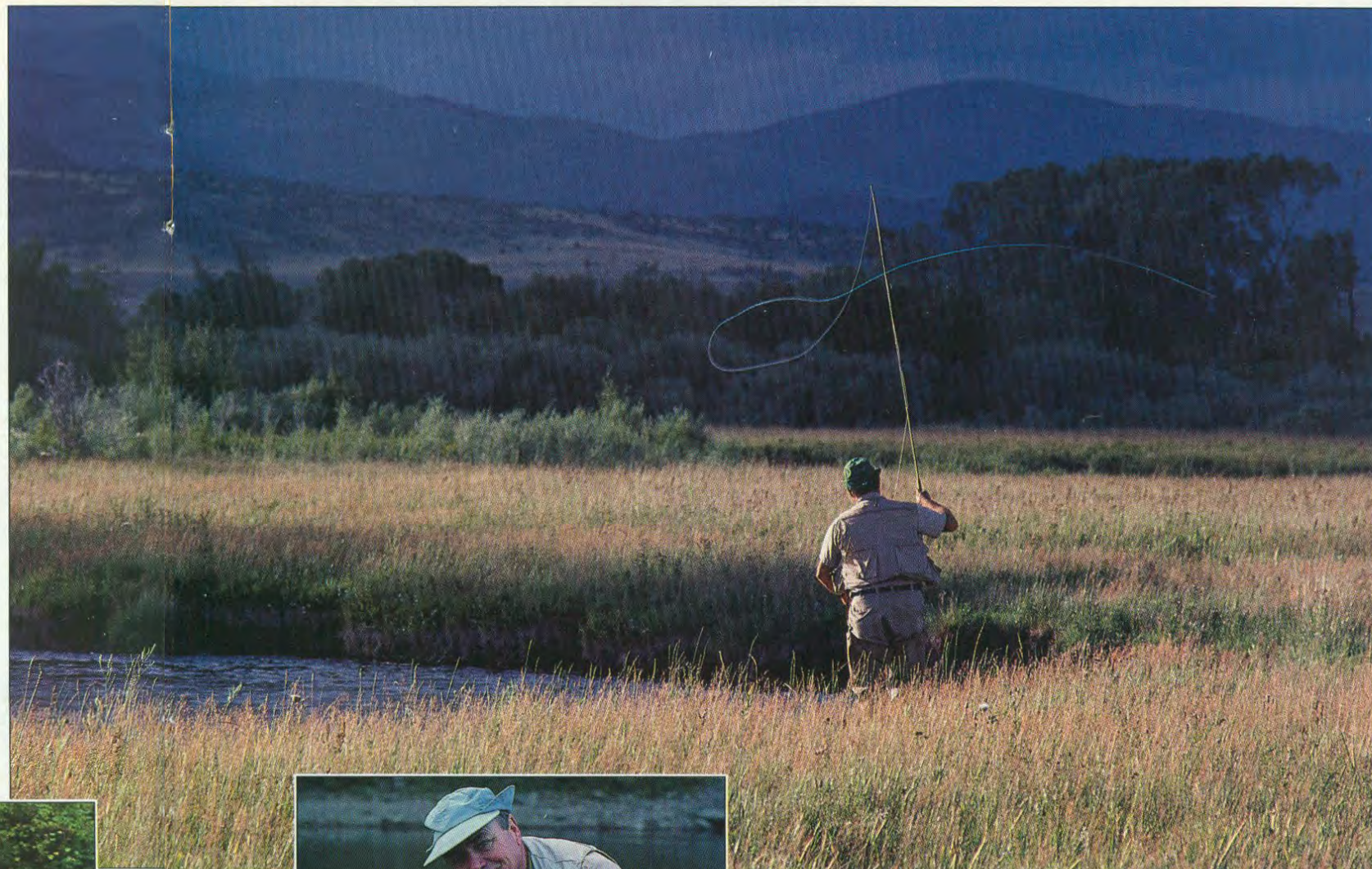
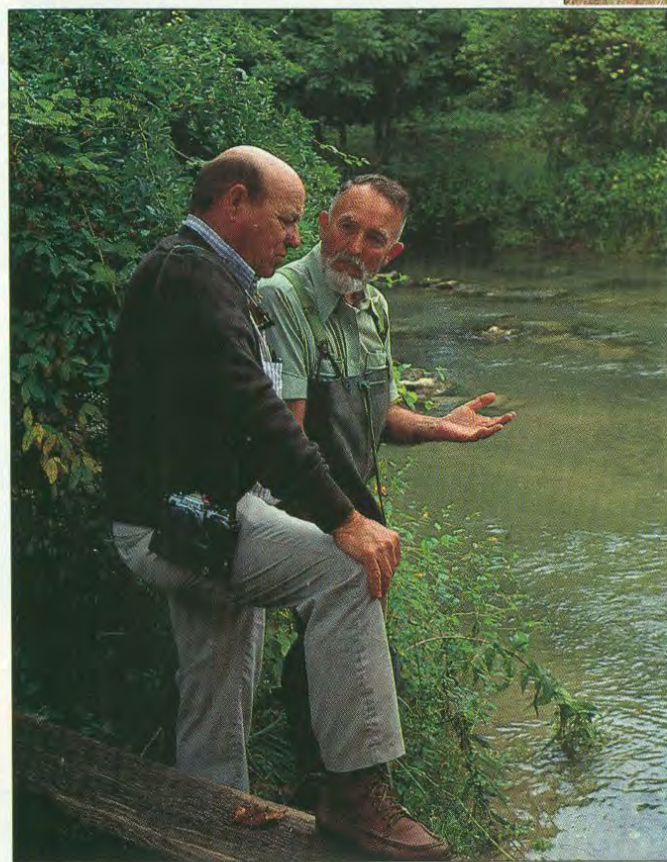
LEFTY REGARDS HIS MARRIAGE to Evelyn Mask in 1947 as the smartest move he ever made, though he didn’t realize it at the time. “For about five years,” he says, “I did more or less as I pleased, hunting grouse and turkey in the fall and winter and fishing all over the place the rest of the time. Even at home, I was busy doing the things I wanted to do. It suddenly dawned on me that I had this great gal who never once complained. From that time on I started paying more attention.”

Ev, as she’s known to her friends, is totally unim-



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTOS

Lefty seems to always have time for others. Above, he teaches fly casting to a beginner. Below, he talks with Charley Fox on the banks of Pennsylvania’s Letort Spring Creek. And when onstream (in Montana, opposite) he is recognized by his superb casting and the large fish he often catches.



LEFTY KREH PHOTO

pressed with Kreh’s popularity. “Why would the President call you?” she asked one time when Jimmy Carter telephoned for some information. Though she fished with him during the early years of their marriage, she rarely goes on trips anymore. “That’s what he does for a living,” says Ev. “If he were a fireman, I wouldn’t ride the truck.”

SHORTLY AFTER THE WAR Lefty applied for a job at the Army Biological Warfare Laboratories in Fort Detrick, Maryland. One of the qualifications required of appli-

cants was that they neither smoke nor drink, because of the hazardous nature of the deadly cultures with which they worked. Kreh fit the bill. When an opening as night foreman was offered, Kreh took it. It fit in with his plans. Kreh is one of those people who require little sleep. Thus, most of his days were spent hunting and fishing. “I got so good at it,” he says, “that soon I was regarded as the best hunter and fisherman in the state.”

Henry Decker, then editor of the *Frederick News Post*, suggested Kreh write an outdoor column. With Decker’s help, Lefty in three years was writing for 12 newspapers and had his own television program. But he was dissatisfied with the photos accompanying his columns, so he began to study photography.

Today, Lefty is almost as well known for his outdoor photography as his casting and fishing. He has his own darkroom for both black-and-white and color developing. He also designs photographic equipment, and he has originated better techniques for taking and developing photographs. For nearly ten years, he taught advanced nature photography for the National Wildlife Federation, and he is the author of *The L.L. Bean*

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Lefty . . .

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Guide to Outdoor Photography. A fully revised and updated edition of Lefty's now standard *Fly Fishing in Salt Water* was recently re-released by Nick Lyons Books, and Lefty recently finished *Saltwater Flies*, a fly pattern book.

Though Henry Decker initiated Lefty's desire to become an outdoor writer, it wasn't until he met Joe Brooks and Tom McNally that his career took a sharp upswing. He attributes the success he enjoys today to these two men. "Brooks was like a father to me," Lefty says, "and gave me my first lesson in outdoor writing." Brooks also recommended Lefty for the job of director of the Metropolitan South Florida Fishing Tournament, a position he held from 1964 to 1973. "That's like being the mayor of South Florida," Lefty says, "and they hand you the key to some of the best fishing in the world. Just about every guide would invite me to his boat, knowing I was in a position to recommend clients to him. The guides showed me their techniques and the best places to fish. In this regard I knew that what they had learned over the years was privileged information and that their livelihood depended on it, so I never revealed any of their secrets to others. Word got around that I could be trusted, and that kept the inside dope pouring in."

Like Brooks, Lefty has both shared his knowledge and taken others under his wing, helping them toward success as professional anglers, writers, or photographers.

IN 1972 LEFTY ACCEPTED a job as outdoor columnist for the *St. Petersburg Times*, but he left the paper a year later when a similar but better position opened in the *Baltimore Sun*. And so, once more the Kreh's moved; this time, back to their native Maryland. Calling Ev to his side, Kreh placed a map of the state on the table and drew a circle around an area the radius of which encompassed such priorities as nearness to the office, travel time to certain rivers and lakes, and access to salt water. "Then," says Lefty, "I told her to find a house she liked and one we could be comfortable in, but to make sure it had a big cellar and a small lawn."

Ev chose a home in Cockeysville, Maryland, a quiet suburban area about a half-hour drive from downtown Baltimore. Their six-room, two-story house has a finished basement where Lefty keeps some 300 rods and reels for all kinds of fishing, whether with fly, plug, spin, or bait. Numerous fly lines, stacks of monofilament, and assorted lures and tackle are all neatly

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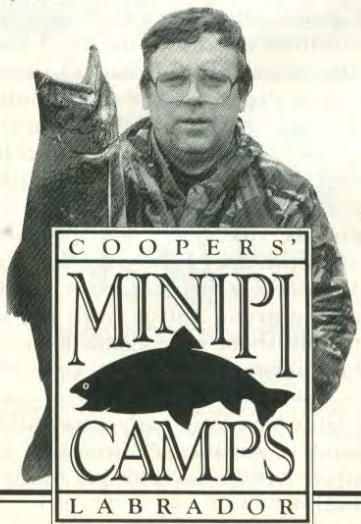
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Lefty . . .

stored or shelved for easy access. The basement includes a darkroom and a work-bench area, where Lefty creates and designs anything that can make life easier whether in fishing, fly tying, or photography. Unlike his days as a youngster when he whittled his own bass plugs from a broom handle using only a knife, Kreh has just about every tool needed to turn wood or metal into some useful gadget.

Lefty does many things well. He is financially comfortable, having in December retired from writing his twice-weekly outdoor column for the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper. He also has income from royalties from a half-dozen books, freelance articles in various magazines, and more engagements than he can fill. In addition, he has a pledge sheet of friends a politician would envy. Above all, he is doing what he wants to do. "I wouldn't trade places with anyone in the world," he says. To Lefty, the world is like a peanut-butter sandwich (his favorite) that he holds in his hand and he's always ready to take a bite. Things did not start that way for him, however.

TODAY, LEFTY'S PUBLIC appearances and demonstrations deal solely with fishing or photography, but there was a time when he was acknowledged as an expert in shooting and hunting. As an exhibition shooter for the Remington Arms Company, Lefty could break four clay birds at a time, powder aspirin tablets with a BB-gun, or send a tossed coin spinning left, right, or forward, depending on the direction called for. As an instructor, he had his students shoot over water so that they could see whether their shot was ahead of or behind the clay birds on a miss. "I gave it all up," he says, "because I believe the days of open-land hunting are numbered, and the antigun fanatics will, little by little, have their way." He still hunts grouse, squirrels, and geese in the fall.

More often than not, when he is asked to make a public appearance, it is to demonstrate or teach his method of fly casting. Other than one early lesson from Brooks and McNally, Kreh was forced to resort to his own ingenuity to develop the effortless style he uses today. "I used to fish from dawn to dusk for smallmouth bass," he says, "and if you don't learn to handle a fly rod properly doing that, your arm will fall off."

As an instructor, Lefty has few equals. But what sets him apart from other professionals is his ability to mimic the mistakes of beginners and advanced anglers alike. "I practice

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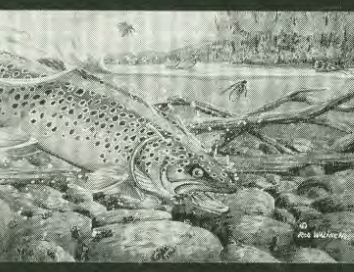
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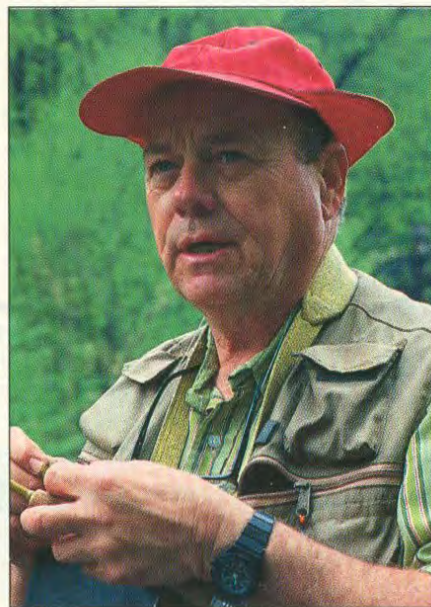
Lefty . . .

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making improper casts," he says, "then, when anglers throw a tailing loop, or make too wide an arc, or whatever, I can show them what caused it. You can't correct a mistake unless you know how it was made."

Though he no longer does it, Lefty, at one time, was an acknowledged showman and exhibition caster, shooting a line for great distances, dropping a fly into a paper cup at 40 feet, and casting with four rods, two in each hand. Adept in all fields, his routine included trick casts using plug or spinning tackle.

The showmanship is still present,



Lefty is the man everyone loves to see arrive. He always has a joke at the ready.

even during instructional demonstrations. One maneuver he employs while explaining casting mechanics is to place the rod on the ground after he has made the cast and keep on talking. As in a tennis match, heads begin to whip back and forth, divided between Lefty's chatter and the fly line still moving out through the guides while the rod lies there.

Few people who attend one of Lefty's clinics are ever disappointed. Though his program runs for a scheduled amount of time, Kreh is usually around to answer questions long after the allotted time has elapsed.

Bill Hunter, one of Lefty's angling friends, recalls an occasion during a Federation of Fly Fishers conclave in West Yellowstone, Montana. "It was the night of the president's banquet," he says, "and several friends and I were all dressed up for the affair. As we walked down the avenue, I glanced over to the

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Lefty . . .

field where the afternoon's activities and clinics had been held. To my surprise, Lefty was still there, though the programs had officially ended over two hours ago. With Lefty was a young lad of perhaps twelve. Lefty had the youngster's hand wrapped in his and was slowly and patiently talking him through the cast. He was in his element, doing what was most important to him. He's a sucker for little kids and fishing widows, and he pays extra attention to them when they show up in his classes.

What? Are there no detractors? Does anyone dislike Lefty?

Sure. But it doesn't matter. He insults you but is never insulting. He puts you on and you laugh at yourself. To be the brunt of a Lefty Kreh joke is to have bragging rights at your club. Talented, funny, instructive yet always learning, zany, racy, and at times even raucous, but all with style. Truly, he is in a class by himself, but with class.

Does he ever lose his cool? No. But he won't take any dishonesty. If you step out of line, he can handle it. You can pull all the stunts you want, as would a friend, but don't take advantage, always mind your manners, and, whatever you do, don't talk while he's giving one of his slide shows. He can put a heckler in place better than a seasoned nightclub entertainer.

What is Lefty Kreh? A man, in every sense of the word, yet still a boy.

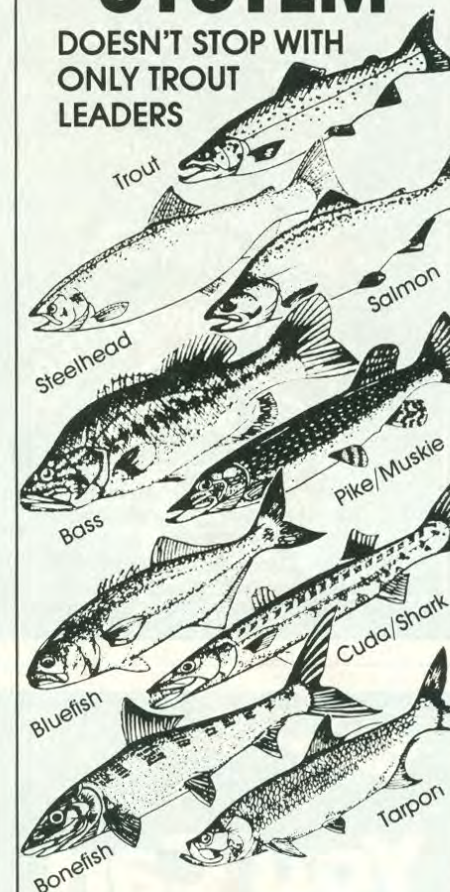
Who is Lefty Kreh? Well, he's just Lefty. As Irv Swope, his oldest and closest friend, puts it, "Anyone who spends a day fishing with Lefty and doesn't have a good time has to have something wrong with him." Swope is absolutely right. To spend a day fishing with Lefty Kreh may just be one of the truly joyful experiences anyone can have. Even if he guides you, there is no pressure. Between the helpful hints and the story telling there are periods of quiet and contentment. Now and then he'll whistle a few bars from an old song and, like everything else he does, it's perfectly in tune. You'll probably get home late, because he'll have done all he can to get you into some fish. You'll be tired, but you won't care. After you say good night and he's gone, you'll still feel good and it will seem that all is well with the world . . . but maybe it's because he helps make it so.



ERIC LEISER is a freelance writer and fly tier. He lives in Wappingers Falls, New York.

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