



DICK WEHRENBURG

BY ERIC BROWN, AKA RIC

EVENTS LEADING TO TEN YEARS OF GREAT FISHING WITH "Dr. Dick"

To understand how I ended up spending so many enjoyable hours in a flats boat with Dick Werenberg, I came to understand his compassion for the wellbeing of his fellow man and realize his amazing depth of knowledge in so many areas. I need to start with an event which occurred before his arrival. The purchase of my first flats boat.

Jack Baggett had found a dealer in Georgia who was selling new Mitzi flats boats, with a 50 H.P. Yamaha and trailer for \$15,000. I cannot remember the exact date of my purchase but the price suggests sometime early in this century. Launched the day after she arrived, my Mitzi and I were ready for my first poling lesson with Jack. It took place on a nearby flat which happened to be blessed with a stiff wind coming in one direction and a fast running tide in the opposite one. With pole in hand, up to the platform I

scrambled, planted the pole and pushed at the same time as a swell lifted the boat's stern. Fortunately, there was enough water and soft mud to break the fall. The gales of laughter were followed by ten minutes of merciless ribbing. Finally, pole in hand, Jack headed to the platform to show me exactly how it should be done. Twenty seconds later another small roller came in from the stern. In deep enough water, Jack was not hurt when he fell off that platform. He must have hit the water pretty hard because his face was really red.

After this incident, it took little time to find someone who could weld airplane aluminum (light as aluminum, but much stronger structurally). He built a removable, three sided, waist high, sissy bar with the bow side open. It fitted perfectly on top of the poling platform.

DICK'S INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF REDFISH

About this time, Dick and his delightful wife Margo arrived at Dataw Island. An experienced freshwater bass fisherman, he took to their big brother in a flash. Although a spin fisherman in the Midwest, he shifted gears immediately and shortly became a first rate fly caster. In seeking to add another 5 feet to his cast he bought a nine foot, single piece fly rod. Further, as a surgeon, he discovered the fine motor skills required to wield the scalpel successfully were ideally suited to the delicate and exact art of fly tying. Within four or five years his garage could have been mistaken for the corner of Bay Street Outfitters solely devoted to fly tying equipment and thousands of flies. His patience and persistence in both these efforts as well as his willingness to share this information and skill were an integral part of the makeup of the man. However, no matter how hard we tried, we could never get him to the Bahamas. He claimed it was too much trouble and too risky to get his nine foot rod on an airplane. I do not believe this reluctance was due to fear of flying. (He would fly to Chicago to see his children.) Rather, I ascribe this behavior to his love of a beautiful jet black BMW coup with just enough room for a nine foot rod, oodles of expertly tied flies, leaders and other miscellaneous fishing gear along with a suitcase of Orvis shirts and



Eric Brown on his Mitzi flats boat.

pants. Each year he would drive to the Florida Keys for tarpon and snook. He maintained he could get to the Everglades in less time than he would have spent driving to Charleston, taking a plane to Tampa, and renting a car to go to the Everglades. Barring an encounter with a gentleman in blue, I am sure he was right. He never got a ticket which I ascribe either to good radar or the ability to out run state troopers — both of which he denies. However, he always said he never found a road in South Carolina where he could even get the BMW's odometer anywhere close to the red line in fifth gear. I also bet he was the only member of our fishing club whose love of speed and cars took him to NASCAR Finals every year.

FINALLY, THE SISSY BAR YEARS

Over the next few years Dick gained a few pounds; my balance became more of an issue. The “sissy bar” became an ideal solution for both of our problems. To get on the platform from the sissy bar was just like climbing a ladder as its railing served as a rung above the platform. One merely had to step on the last rung in the tower and holding the top of the sissy bar, step off unto the platform. As a result of the sissy bar, we became biweekly fishing buddies covering a lot of water for over ten years between the Beaufort International Airport and the mouth of Trenchards Inlet. In those trips I learned a great deal about his Vietnam experience as a frontline surgeon fresh out of medical school. He learned to be totally focused on the surgery he was performing, many times close to, or still within artillery range of the front lines. In some cases at night he was operating solely with the aid of flashlight and gas lantern. Some of the wounded required very advanced surgery which, in a hospital, would only be done by a surgeon with at least ten years of experience. He knew he had to attempt it as the alternative was the soldier's certain death. Fresh out of medical school with limited residency experience, he was able to save many of these men. He returned to the Midwest with more experience than he would have had in fifteen years as a practicing surgeon in a U. S. hospital. Because of his experience and skill, he was recognized as one of the top emergency room surgeons in the midwest region. As a result, he was able to put together a highly successful medical group prior to his retirement to Beaufort.

THE MERGER OF MEDICAL AND PISCATORIAL SCIENCE - AKA "DRINKS WITH THE DOCS"

After the monthly meetings of the Sea Island Fly Fishers Club there was usually an informal meeting of those still craving a bit of liquid refreshment as well as the opportunity to wind down after the edge-of-the-seat virtual fishing for giant Redfish, false albacore, salmon, or bonefish. Always in attendance were the two expert surgeons cum fishermen — Dick Wehrenberg and Steve Peskoe — who you always wanted on your next trip lest there be an embedded hook, a deep gash, or heaven forbid, a major catastrophe. You knew that that second bag they carried to the lodge was not loaded with flies but contained medicines and equipment for just about everything but open heart surgery.

Between his experience in Florida fishing and the many sissy bar trips to fishing areas near Dataw, Monkey Island, as well the waters around Fripp, and Trenchards Inlet, Dick was able to be a provider of local hotspots locations. In spite of his razor sharp mind, I was always surprised at his inability to pinpoint the precise location of the flat where the large Redfish schools were to be found.

When it came to fishing in the Bahamas and South America, Steve was a veritable encyclopedia with descriptions of the fishing, fishing lodges, equipment, flies, and even how to get to some which were deep in the jungle. I am sure some who joined these post-Fly Club gatherings were seeking "fin" knowledge. However, a painful foot or shoulder or even diverticulosis, that seemed to be interfering with fishing, needed to get a fishing doctor's thinking on the matter. I was always struck by their patience and willingness to share information, both fishing and medical.

THE MAGIC MOMENT

It was a sunny day in mid-January. Fish had begun to form large schools in almost gin clean water, well maybe the color of gin in a dirty martini. Dick spotted the large school just minutes after launching. They were very slow to react to the fly in the cold water. Unless you literally came within an inch of the Redfish's

mouth, nothing happened. This situation demanded precise casting.

After releasing about 35 fish, Dick looked at me and said, "Let's go home now." After a minute, "We will always remember this time." We knew that if we'd spent the remainder of the day fishing, we would ruin the magic of this moment. That's when I understood what fishing really meant to Dick.

And I will always remember that time.

Dick Wehrenberg passed away on Tuesday, November 17, 2020 at 4:10 P.M. He was 84 years old.