

# Judo, Zane, Mr. Weewart, and I

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I've fished with my brother many times through the years. In the early days, when we were both kids, we crouched together over a can of worms. We dangled lines side by side from a small wooden pier to which were tethered the small rowboats that quietly plied the waters of Lake Hope in Southern Ohio. We sat, seemingly for hours, and with surprising patience, staring at our red and white plastic bobbers, waiting for the telltale tug. We caught bluegills and small bass while the adults were up above at the big picnic shelter grilling burgers and making spicy sloppy Joes and slicing hunky, juicy beefsteak tomatoes. These were big family gatherings. The aunts and uncles and cousins lived in Vinton and Jackson Counties, home of serenely rolling hills, beautiful autumns, deserted strip mines, small Welsh and Irish communities, and stories, still circulating then, of hidden Civil War treasures. It was to these counties we fled most every weekend from our flat and sterile adopted community of Beavercreek, near Dayton. And each weekend, we visited, one by one, house by house, all of those to whom we had some blood tie. At Aunt Susan's, we sat for tea and toast, mother to look at Uncle Max's latest acquisition of antique glass or miniature painting, dad to talk baseball with his brothers, me to read Catholic comics in some sulky window seat behind a grand piano. At Aunt Bertha's we viewed her seldom ambulatory self surrounded by the water stained, peeling wall paper of the decaying Patterson mansion she inherited from my great grandparents. At best on those visits, Grandma Pat and I would escape the moldy bedroom in which lay Bertha Gundlefinger, dying for many of my childhood years, and rock gently on the old porch swing, taking care not to step too heavily on floorboards lest we fall through. At Aunt Dorothy's, we ate apple dumplings and helped her look for missing earrings.



*Figure 1 Llyn on deck of Judo and Shelley's house with catch*

In the summer, my Dayton parents rented a cabin at Lake Hope. My other grandmother, Nan, was with us. We caught and cooked fish, swam, and entertained all the local folk with those robust picnics.

Though my brother is seven years younger, I remember him with his worms and pole, a fishing fiend even then.

He has lived on and fished the Rogue River in Southern Oregon for nearly forty years now. And a couple of weeks ago I fished with him again.

Steelhead swim up the Rogue from the Pacific to spawn. They make redds in the creeks just like salmon. Normally, they, unlike salmon, go back to the ocean. Some get caught. Others just have bad luck or lose the will or strength to do that journey again. They aren't eating in the river, so those who are caught are quite simply annoyed by the plug or fly they see flicking or wobbling in their path. Grumpy, snappy fish get caught. Those who stay focused on their goal make it. To me, it is quite simple.

But it isn't that simple. Judo has made a science of it.

I glanced over his shoulder after a day of fishing in early December and saw the most extraordinary drawings. They reminded me of Krazy Kat landscapes. They were fine line drawings, done, I understood later, with a Pilot Precision .005 roller ball. Judo has tried many drawing pens and this is his favorite. I admitted to him that I'd peeked from behind and wondered what wonderful thing I'd seen. Turns out it was his journal. At first, years ago, he recorded dates, occurrences, height of the river, river conditions including temperature, rainfall, moon phase, fish caught, where caught, on what. Then he began elaborating, embellishing, ornamenting. First, he decorated the dates themselves with a few hills or rocks. Now he invests enough time to create vast imaginary rocky scenes. And he adds color. My brother is a comic book aficionado. We both grew up on Donald and Scrooge McDuck. Donald Duck adventures were probably my first introduction, God help me, to the Inca, for example. But the other night, he loaned me some Rocky and Bullwinkle and even an Itchy and Scratchy. He does keep up.

He studies not only stories but the drawings, especially the landscapes. The work of Carl Barks in those early Donald comics is probably his favorite. And among other knockout moments of his life is seeing Carl Barks around Grants Pass on occasion.

Thus informed by the Carl's technique, he has taught himself. Each page of his journal is a trek into what and how he sees, how he thinks, and how he studies the river and fish that dominate his life and have for so long. You see, the first thing he's seen when he's looked out the window in the morning for these past several decades is that river, the Rogue, and specifically Rocky Riffle. Legendary Rocky Riffle.



Rocky Riffle takes up a whole chapter in Zane Grey's *Tales of Fresh Water Fishing*. The book was published in 1928 though the trip he writes about took place in 1924. A first edition occupies a place on Judo's bookshelf next to copies of our Dad's circa 1915 *Boy Mechanics*.

Grey loved the Rogue and Rocky Riffle:

“I could see where the wide stream, gliding from round the bend above, grew swifter with a glancing smooth current and divided its hurrying volume over a gravel bar on the far side and dark deep channels between brown ledges on my side. Below these, the water broke into a most alluring ripple, and then went on into swift massed volume, to pour white and roaring over a ledge into a rough pool, and from that over another and less fall into a narrow-curved channel which soon glided, spotted with foam, around another bend.”



Figure 2 One of those millions of happy days

The steelhead themselves take on mystical qualities in his book. The men on Grey’s trip change tackle regularly to try to get these wily fish to rise. The fish regularly outwit the men anyway. They dive, they hide, they strike but they will not be landed. The men shake their heads, watch the “old timers” in cloaked envy, almost give up their gentlemanly fisher ways in desperation. Because these are noblemen who do not hook a fish and drag it to shore or even use “bait.” They “play” their fish, run with them, even at risk of drowning, down the dangerous stream. They admire their scheming cleverness. They often let them go, honoring the fish as worthy opponents.

And of course, we too release any wild or undersized creatures.

Fishing is “intellectual” Judo says. It is about making the fly, about skill, cunning, the play.



Figure 3 Judo in familiar activity

“Killing is anticlimactic.” He deplors those who cheat by keeping wild ones. “One fish gone can screw up the whole population of a creek.” And some do cheat. Some sneak out and hide fish along the river so they won’t be caught with them in their boats.

Zane wrote about this:

“Suddenly a heavy swirl attracted my roving gaze. At the same instant George brought up his rod hard. It bent double. Then a cracking split of the water let out a magnificent steelhead. Up he shot in a curving tussling leap! He was huge—nine pounds—ten.

George had hooked him. What a slash when he went down!”

Grey yelled at George just as Judo yelled at me when I hooked my first big one. “Let him run.” “Give him line.” Hard to remember in the excitement. Judo knew when mine was about to jump. “Be ready, rod down, ‘bow to royalty.’” How did he know? He couldn’t explain it, but I learned to “bow to royalty.”



Judo and I were on the river in near-freezing weather. A woman who caretakes Almeda park thought we were crazy. It was cold but worth it. We went out in Judo's drift boat and trolled. When we fish, Judo keeps the boat in the current, making several passes in the spots he knows are good. "Where you catch a fish once, you can catch a fish again." He has a map of the river in his head. And of course, there is his journal for reference. "You have to figure out why there was a fish there," when you are learning a river. "Was it ledgy, gravelly, was there a slot..."

Judo fitted me out with a Berkley IMG, 8 1/2-foot rod and a Swedish-made Ambassador reel with a ten-pound test line. The Berkley is a medium-light action casting rod, he tells me. He showed me how to "thumb" the line and urged me to get a "feel for it," as we started down the river. "Let the fish run and dive," he said. "Put the tip down when the fish jumps." I threw the line out then let the fair lead zip across the drum four or five times, back and forth.

The plug on the end of my line was, I swear he said, called Mr. Weewart. It had big, buggy eyes, a bright chromed underbody, a dark overcoat, and a slash of red at its "throat." When it is functioning properly in the water, the rod tip wobbles slightly. I used Mr. Weewart every day. He became a talisman, my great hope, my sure thing.

Each day out, and we went out three days in a row, my hands, even with gloves, grew numb and stiff. I could hardly reel in my first fish. But I did. The hours in the boat and on the river were like a dream, details lost but impressions lasting. We saw a deep, richly brown mink cavorting on the bank one day. Eagles flew over us. Red-tailed hawks sang to us. The sometimes sun showed through fog and clouds in patches of deep blue.



Figure 5 On the Rogue in Judo's territory in Judo's drift boat

Day one, I caught my first steelhead behind the visitor center at Smullin. He was a 21-inch wild fish. We got him close enough to the boat to see who he was, then let him go without even bringing him out of the water. Then, just as we were about to take the boat in, I caught a 27-inch fish at the top of Almeda Rapid. I, apparently, followed directions. This fish jumped and dove and gave me the kind of moments Grey writes about and Judo lives for.

Day two. The moon is full. I caught a wild hen at Twin Rocks. She was probably 26 to 28 inches. Released off the side of the boat. But another great ride. Then I hooked what people call a half-pounder at the top of Rocky Riffle. This was a good dinner sized fish.

Day three. The water is getting colder. It is also getting lower. We were cold and caught nothing.



Figure 4 Judo demonstrates

Do I love fishing? I loved these three days. I loved the time with my brother, time that brings back so many days of our youth. And one day, my son was with us too! I've learned that I love Zane Grey's fishing stories and that there is much more romance to it all than I dreamed. I understand when Judo says, "Fishing is humbling." One day you're high as a kite with the bites and the contest. Then next day, zip. What's the difference? Hundreds of variables. The trick that worked like a wonder for weeks doesn't work ever again.

When I was nineteen I caught a marlin. Yes. I did. All alone. The captain wouldn't let the boys who rushed to take the pole from me do it. Two hundred and six pounds. Near Honolulu. It took two hours or so to land and my face was a scarlet mask at the end of the struggle. The look of that beautiful deep-sea beast has stayed with me and I still weep a bit when I remember the crew whacking it on the head to kill it. I thought then, I will never be party to this killing again. Then I watched Judo take out a rough wooden "bat" made from an old oar and hit the shiny, silver steelhead I'd brought in really hard, in just the same way and in the same place on its body as the man hit the marlin. I saw life leave its eyes. So quickly. Life is that fragile. Theirs. Ours. We rowed to shore and Judo slit its throat and "bled" it while I wondered at its dark burgundy gills and little heart.



Figure 6 Llyn and Marlin with Peace Corps buddies near Honolulu

Judo is not a brute nor is he insensitive. He gives thanks before he kills a fish. He lets more go than he keeps. He always releases the first catch. He told me over the phone the other day that the bat or mallet used to finish a fish is called a "priest" or a "fish priest." A friend found the origin of this odd term in the Oxford English Dictionary. A "fish priest" is a "baton or cudgel used in administering the last rites to a fish" as does the priest with humans. (Though we don't think of priests whacking humans on the noggin.) It's a term used by the Irish, Scots and English. Of course, Judo is correct in how he thinks about this moment of the kill though his own words are more about honoring the horrifically displaced Rogue River Indians; there is something sacred about this death administered by a hungry hand. And there is something special required from those who administer it.



At the same time that I thought about life and death, I understood something about how it feels to bring something home, something I've acquired with my time and skill, to feed the family. Nothing intellectual about that.

These days we spent together and a description of the fish we caught are carefully recorded among the rocks and crevices of Judo's journals. My name might even be there, perhaps engraved on one of the towering stones near a cache of Clovis points. I hope so.