



Bernard V. 'Lefty' Kreh enjoys a good laugh.

## Coffee with **Lefty Kreh**

Steve Cooper interviews the man behind the legend.

Age is not a concept that sits easily with Lefty Kreh. He is, at 86 years old, the doyen of fly-casters, and still at the height of his considerable powers: bursting with knowledge, alive with ideas and unshakeable in his convictions.

He is also quick, funny, energetic, warm and generous — a small, elderly man in a battered, up-down flats cap who will share his time, his wisdom and pretty much anything he owns with anybody who exhibits the sort of passion for angling that he has made an art form.

Lefty has fished with Hemingway and Castro, is the angling companion of choice for US presidents and the rich and famous. But when this fishing scribbler from Australia dropped by, he found time to take him to dinner and then devote a day to sharing his thoughts, teaching him new ways to cast a fly and to tie familiar knots, maintaining a steady barrage of glorious one-liners and eventually driving him to the nearest airport — leaving him astonished and humbled.

When Lefty collected me at Baltimore International airport, he was

wearing that flats cap, and carried a walking stick. Yep, I thought, he fits the image of an ageing veteran in reasonable health. I had thought that he could be a mite feeble: but boy, was I wrong. He has 20-20 vision, ears that could hear a jack rabbit pass wind at 50 metres and a mind as sharp as a razor.

"I carry the walking stick because of the steps," he explained as we walked out of the airport baggage collection to his car. "I smashed my kneecap getting down from a casting platform about three years ago: the knee's okay but I sometimes have trouble with steps."

## Coffee with Lefty Kreh . . . continued

Few individuals command the respect of presidents, Third World dictators and the general angling public. To be able to do so says much about a man's credibility, but nothing about where he came from or his motivations. Lefty is a man driven by a need to improve, not just fly-casting and fishing, but anything that he finds inefficient enough to aggravate him.

Lefty was drafted in the Second World War, served in an artillery unit at the Battle of the Bulge and said his outfit was the first to meet the Russians on the Elbe River. After the war he came home to Frederick in Maryland and went to work at Fort Detrick, a research centre for biological warfare.

is the anthrax they isolated and are holding now. I never knew that."

There is also a Temple Fork Outfitters range of fly rods that carry the same initials, but these won't make you sick.

Lefty's introduction to fly fishing came courtesy of the late American outdoors writer Joe Brooks, fishing in 1947 for smallmouth bass on the Potomac River. "When I took him fishing I had never seen a fly caster and Joe showed up with a bamboo fly rod," Lefty said.

"At lunchtime we sat on some rocks and Joe spotted all these fish rising. I did not know then that there were flying ants trying to get across the Potomac, which was about 300 yards

Explaining his method Lefty said: "There are two ways to fly cast — an efficient and an inefficient way. Ninety per cent of problems in fly-casting occur on the forward stroke and it's because you made a vertical backstroke. When you make a vertical backstroke you create all kinds of problems in casting whereas if you can take your rod back much lower and come straight through, you virtually eliminate 90 per cent of the problems in casting."

In support of his casting style Lefty cited a recent fishing trip: "I'm 86 years old; in fact I'm so old that I remember when men wore tattoos and women wore the ear rings. This last summer I was at Maine, casting 70–80 feet of line most of the time for nine hours and I wasn't tired at the end of the day."

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It is hard to pass up the offer of a bit of fly casting tuition.



"We grew the bacteria (like anthrax) all of the scientists would work with," Lefty said. He was one of three people to become infected with anthrax. The other two died from pulmonary anthrax but Lefty was lucky, he was infected in the arm and spent about three months in hospital.

The anthrax recurred more than 60 years later in another form when there was an anthrax scare in the US and a reporter from the *New York Times* contacted him and said: "Did you know there is a strain of anthrax named after you?"

"Well, I didn't know at the time, but if you remove a disease from somebody and can concentrate it, then it is more virulent on the next person," Lefty said. "The scientists were able to remove anthrax from me and concentrate it. My initials are BVK and BVK1

wide. Millions of these ants were falling on the water and we could see these rings where the smallmouth were feeding on them.

"Joe walked up and pulled this rope like thing off the reel and began to cast; a ring appeared and he dropped a black ghost streamer into that ring and hooked a fish. He did this about seven times and I said to myself I got to have some of this."

That evening Lefty drove 50 miles to Baltimore in a Model A Ford and Joe gave him his first fly-casting lesson.

"I began to cast the way everybody casts and gradually, over the years, I learned that the traditional 9 o'clock to 1 o'clock method and using only the arm was extremely inefficient," he said.

True to form, Lefty began developing a different style of fly-casting.

Promoting a casting style at odds with many in the fly-fishing fraternity brings forth its critics. Lefty said he wrote an article for *Outdoor Life* magazine in 1965 about taking the rod way back almost parallel to the water for distance casting, "and just got a huge number of disparaging letters about never doing a thing like that."

When Lefty started writing newspaper columns in 1951, there were only about six newspaper outdoor columns in the US and four magazines: *Field and Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, *Sports Afield* and *Fur, Fish and Game*.

"The thing that was good about it was that this was right after the Second World War; 13 million servicemen came home to the US and they hadn't hunted or fished the whole time the war was on," Lefty said.

"Our country was not like it is now;

we were really mostly rural small towns and you could walk outside almost any town and find some place to fish or hunt.

"I also did lots of outdoor columns about nature. I started writing one column in a small paper and ended up writing five columns in the region before I went to other bigger newspapers." This included working as the outdoor editor on the *Baltimore Sun* for 18 years from 1973. His column proved so popular it was syndicated across the US.

In the late 1950s, at 38 years of age and with 18 years working at Fort Detrick, Lefty decided it was time to become a fulltime outdoor writer. It was a career that would see him write more than 30 books.

In 1959, right after he took over Cuba, Fidel Castro invited Lefty to come and fish the Hemingway 14th White Marlin Tournament.

"I spent two and a half days on Ernest Hemingway's boat, *Pilar*; I had just started to write columns and magazine articles and so on so I thought this is a great chance to find out about writing," Lefty said.

"I was talking to Hemingway this day and I said, 'Ernest, how do you tell what is good writing.' And he thought for a minute, and I think it may be the best answer I ever heard, he said, 'It can't be edited.'

"When you think about that, if you took anything out, or added anything, it would diminish the writing."

Castro won the tournament and

Lefty was on his boat as an observer. "Castro loved fishing and I really liked Castro: I enjoyed the fishing in Cuba so much that I've been back five times."

In 1964, Joe Brooks got Lefty a job at the *Miami Herald* as manager of the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament (MET) that the paper sponsored. The largest fishing tournament in the world, it encompassed all of South Florida.

"That tournament was large enough that I had nine secretaries and we got a quarter of a million entries in 16 weeks," Lefty said. "It covered everything from blue marlin to bluegills.

"Joe told me the job was like being the mayor of all south Florida fishing, that the tournament was the hub that all the fishing clubs worked around. He advised that if I could get those clubs to co-operate, it would make the tournament a success.

"I was there four or five days when one of the clubs invited me over to do a casting demonstration," Lefty said. "You know, they really thought that anybody north of Florida didn't know anything about fishing and were so far above most people that they really had a conceited attitude.

"Truth of the matter was they didn't know a damn thing about fly casting, so I knew I had to do something impressive. So I went to the meeting and after the business the president got up and in a sort of nasty, sarcastic way said, 'Well the new MET tournament master, Lefty Kreh, is going to

give a fly casting demonstration.'"

A club member at the time, and well known fly fisherman, Flip Pallot tells the story of that meeting in his book: *Memories, Mangroves & Magic*:

*'I showed up for the meeting just to see what all the fuss was about and to see if I could give him (Lefty) a few pointers on his casting.*

*As I look back on that evening, I believe Lefty sensed that folks resented his replacing George Robey (former MET manager) at the tournament, and Lefty also sensed that this evening would be an opportunity to impress a bunch of the locals and establish himself as a casting authority.*

*He strung up an 8 weight, glass rod and laid it down on the grass beside where he stood. There was some talking in the crowd. He didn't exactly have everyone's attention.*

*He stripped the entire fly line out through the rod tip and piled the line up on the ground beside the rod. People were still visiting and talking among themselves.*

*Lefty picked up the belly of the fly line in his hands, made a couple of false casts, and then shot almost the entire fly line across the lawn of the Elk's Lodge ... without using the rod! He shot an entire fly line with his bare hands. No rod!*

*We all saw it!*

*At that moment, a pin dropping would have sounded like a 50 car pile up on the LA freeway, and in that very same moment, my fly fishing life changed forever.'*

## Coffee with Lefty Kreh... continued



Lefty's basement is a tackle warehouse with a select space marked out for everything. It's called organisation but there is a dash of the squirrel factor about it.

Lefty said that within the following week at least 15 club members were at his house and they started having regular casting sessions.

"That made me a buddy, a peer so to speak, and so they then began to share all of their knowledge with me about how to use plug tackle and how to use fly tackle and that's when we developed so many of these knots."

Lefty has been linked to a couple of US presidents but the news reports have been for the wrong reasons.

"Three times US President George Bush (senior) and I tried to get together but it never happened," Lefty said.

"Let's say you're supposed to give a talk to a big fishing club near you on a Tuesday night and your Premier calls you and says I would like you to go with me somewhere on that Tuesday night... I think you would go to the club.

"That's what happened with me. I actually was asked by President Carter three times before I fished with him.

"But they won't give you (I guess it's for security reasons) any advanced notice. Camp David is only about an hour and a half from here. Three different times Carter's people called and said President Carter would like to fish with you at Camp David tomorrow. Well, I had to say no three times.

"Once I was going away and twice I had committed to nearby clubs to give talks. They put it in the newspapers and everything else. But I wasn't

going to call the club and say I can go fish with the president so I'm not going to come to your club tonight."

"You know wives look at us differently to other people and the third time President Carter's people called, after I got off the phone, Ev (Evelyn) said to me: 'Who was that?'

"I said it was President Carter's people. 'What did they want?' she asked.

"I said President Carter wants to fish with me and I can't make it."

"Well, you know she looked me up and down like I had worms and she said: 'Why would the president want to fish with you?'

"Wives see you sitting on the toilet and everything, they're not impressed with us at all!

"I was never able to fish with George Bush simply because when he could go I couldn't; or when I could go he couldn't, but I did go with Carter and he's one of the nicest guys you've ever met in your life. Perfectly charming."

Lefty gets back to Evelyn, his wife of 65 years. As Lefty tells the story, there was a surprise 40th wedding anniversary organised for Ev and himself.

"My wife, who never tells jokes, is standing close to some other women and one of them said: 'How could you stand him for 40 years.' And with deadpan face she said: 'You know, he's only been home 25 years.' But dammit, she was serious."

Lefty is a cross between Inspec-

tor Gadget and Mr Fixit. He has an extraordinary eye for detailing and problem solving and is constantly looking to improve everything he does.

"Most people accept the problems, I don't. I set out to solve them," he explained. "If it's an aggravation, I don't accept it.

"When I started outdoor writing I was writing a quarter to half pages three times a week in a newspaper. I was writing for four magazines; I was doing clinics and seminars; I was spending a lot of time with my wife and family and I realised if I didn't get organised I couldn't do any of this.

"So the organisation came from desperation. I can go right down the cellar in the dark and find a pair of needle nose pliers because I know they are in an exact place and they always go back in that place."

Lefty isn't as upbeat about the future of fly fishing, saying it will diminish in the US and in other countries that have the same problems including pollution and spent streams.

"The time is fast approaching in the US when to have good fishing you almost need to have it on private land," he said. "The public does not take care of public water very well; they trash it and they over poach it.

"I know that goes against the face of what everybody wants to hear but the truth of the matter is that when you let people run amok to do what they want, a certain percentage of those people are going to make it very disruptive, and it ends up the property will be closed to the public."

Lefty puts the root of the problem squarely on a lack of discipline at home and in schools saying that once you lose discipline in younger people you've lost everything.

"It's almost like Dominoes being tripped over and it starts with the discipline in the kids. To me it's so damn simple and most people can't see it," he said. "Parents don't take their children outdoors to do things anymore, so the children gravitate to electronic devices and they have lost complete appreciation for the outdoors.

"When we were younger we walked places, rode bikes and went hunting and fishing, and your parents or your uncles took you fishing."

When he dropped me off at Baltimore airport, Lefty went home to start packing as he was heading for Texas for a few days of filming. Amazing, he just never seems to stop. **FI**