

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

For Jack Dennis, it's all about the teaching

October 1, 2005

By WILLY ZIMMER

Star-Tribune staff writer

By any yardstick, Jack Dennis has had a great life.

The renowned Jackson fly angler is a successful author and businessman, and much in demand as a speaker at fishing gatherings. He travels the world to fish exotic locations, and has a collection of famous angling buddies from basketball icons Bobby Knight and Denny Crum, to Vice-President Dick Cheney.

Dennis was the main attraction at the Wyoming Angler's Symposium last weekend at the University of Wyoming. In a sit-down interview, Dennis reflected on other experiences from fly-tying with baseball great Ted Williams to his relationship with fellow fishing greats Curt Gowdy and Lee Wulff.

But his eyes really light up when he speaks of sharing his love of fly-fishing with young people.

Which is why he was at the student symposium in Laramie for the ninth consecutive year, and expects to be back for at least one more.

"As I get older in life, I've pretty much planned I want to keep teaching all the way until the end," he said. "I love teaching these kids. (The UW symposium) is the smallest thing I do, but this is fun because it's Wyoming."

Part of his teaching mission in the near future will center around coaching Flyfishing Team USA, and when he speaks about U.S. fly-fishing his competitive side comes out. Dennis recalled with disdain a snooty French coach that once told him the U.S. would never medal at the international competition.

Dennis' colleague and fellow angler, Jeff Currier, ultimately proved the Frenchman wrong in 2003 when he took home an individual bronze.

Now Dennis hopes for team honors. The U.S. broke through in 2003 with an eighth-place finish, its first time in the top 10. Team USA followed that up with a ninth-place in 2004, and Dennis barely restrained himself from pounding a fist on the table, while predicting "We will win a medal."

He predicts that may happen in 2006 in Portugal, because Portuguese rivers fish well for anglers skilled with a fly and a dropper.

To earn that medal, Dennis has made some changes in the way Team USA does business. On the advice of his friend, former University of Louisville basketball coach Denny Crum, Dennis chooses the team rather than a selection committee.

"He said to me, 'the first thing you've got to do is get control of the team. You've got to pick your own people.' I took his advice."

The team's nymphing skills are also polished every year prior to the tournament in a "boot camp" with legendary Polish angler and former world champion, Wladyslaw Trzebunia,

And future members of Team USA will be found in qualifying tournaments.

"We now have money to hold contests to pick better people," Dennis said. "We're going to form it like the Olympics, and have a team of 12 people and they'll train and I'll take the best six out of the 12."

"We're going to get there," he added. "I believe there's somebody out there that's better than Jeff. Somewhere in America there's a guy that's got that touch. There's a Vlade (Trzebunia) somewhere."

Dennis is also exploring an opportunity to teach a little history. He hopes someday to find support to add a collection of fishing memorabilia to UW's American Heritage Center. The center currently houses one of the world's finest libraries of fishing literature in the Toppan and LaFontaine collections.

Dennis envisions adding memorabilia, video and photo archives to honor angling luminaries like Gowdy.

"We have some wonderful anglers in Wyoming," he said. "You think about the ones that were in the past with Herbert Hoover coming out here, and the Rockefellers and the Queen of England. And we've always had a tradition of governors fishing."

"We've got to be thinking about this somewhere in Wyoming to be able to honor a lot of people that contributed to fishing. We've got one of the premier book collections. Now we have the opportunity to add equipment in a museum."

It would be a fitting tribute for a Wyoming boy who contributed by teaching people to fish.

"People always ask me 'if you had anywhere to fish, where would it be? 'A certain little river in Pinedale, Wyoming,'" Dennis said. "I never tell them which river, but still I was born in Wyoming and I want to die in Wyoming. ... Fly-fishing has been very good to me and I never forget where I'm from."