

LEARN 2 FISH WITH US A Driving Passion

Going to great lengths for young people
to advance the sport of fishing



Greg Karch presenting a Learn 2 Fish With Us seminar
to a group of children at an outdoor classroom.



By Cooper Radtke,
Badger Sportsman editor

Nearly 39 years ago, a young Greg Karch and his buddy, Don, secured their 12-foot boat on top of his slightly larger 13-foot AMC Gremlin car.

For years the two had fished the local watering hole, Ruby Creek, pulling all varieties of fish from its depths. But it was the addition of a driver's license, a modern-day youth right-of-passage, that fed their curiosity.

That, and some ratchet straps.

In their modest boat, the two set out to indulge their appetite for fishing, tackling even the greatest of lakes, Lake Michigan, on a hunt for salmon.

It was in these youth years that Karch developed his passion for fishing, cultivating a life-long love.

"If it wasn't for that," Karch says now, reminiscing on his first tastes of freedom, "who knows where I would've gone, or what I would have done."

Sharing the passion

The drive to spread this love of fishing didn't surface until years later, in 2006, when the Oshkosh resident felt it was time to do more.

Wanting to cultivate the same love of fishing in young kids that he has, Karch orchestrated his first educational fishing clinic behind the mission to "grow the sport of fishing by educating and inspiring beginner and experienced anglers."

Pulling from his own experience and resources, and aided by a host of volunteers from Thrivent Financial – the Appleton-based fraternal insurance organization where he works by day as the lead application engineer – the first clinic proved to have a deeper impact than simply teaching kids how to catch a fish. The conclusion of his first event didn't simply end by handing out gear and a T-shirt to the kids, but rather in the continued mentorship and enthusiasm of a couple of the adult volunteers.

It became evident to Karch that even more could be done. The impression made on the kids was a gratifying feeling. One that resonated deeply. So began the learning and growing process.

Armed with the memory of a younger self and admittedly learning along the way by winging it, Karch aimed to provide the resources he didn't have as a kid to the youth of today. Eight years after that first trial clinic, the free fishing clinics evolved into the refined not-for-profit that's become Learn 2 Fish With Us.

Learn 2 Fish With Us

Who: Greg Karch, founder.

Mission: Grow the sport of fishing by educating and inspiring beginner and experienced anglers.

Origin: Started in 2006, became a nonprofit in 2014

Outreach: 35,000 anglers educated to date.

Learn more: www.learn2fishwithus.com

A Learn 2 Fish With Us attendee practicing his newly learned skills.



Pushing forward

Since formally incorporating in 2014, Learn 2 Fish With Us has been responsible for the education of thousands of children and parents alike.

The interactive Fishing Basics seminar educates the attendee through hands-on instruction, and promotes the aquatic invasive species spread prevention program message, "Clean, drain, dry."

A young audience with an aptitude for fleeting attention spans is especially catered to through this first-hand teaching. All participants are led through various techniques in knot tying, species of fish, rod and reel basics, and bait options. But rather than being led through a PowerPoint presentation, the children practice casting techniques on the spot, feel live bait swimming between their fingers, and smell the stench of Gulp for the first time. Having the kids go through these processes themselves – accompanied by other kids their age – plays to their excitement, builds confidence and encourages them to try new things.

"When I was a kid, I never wanted to get up in front of

people,” said Karch. “but these kids, they want to come up and show you they can do it!”

Those kids who attend not only receive knowledge on practical fishing application and local ecology, but also practice safety habits to minimize the risk of injury around water and tackle. To date, not one injury has occurred while holding events. Despite the emphasis on safety and education, every bit of the seminar is done with a flare and animation which is digestible, and more importantly, fun.

Though educating is a knack for Karch, he isn't a teacher by profession. Before its years as a nonprofit, Learn 2 Fish With Us events were spearheaded by Karch and his wife, Karen, dutifully pouring hundreds of personal hours and thousands of dollars of their own funding into the project. A collection of rods, reels and tackle filled the basement of their home – the physical accompaniment to the individual passion that drove Learn 2 Fish With Us' growth. Slowly, other people began to notice.

The public and local businesses from the Oshkosh and Fox Valley region started to aid in the development of Karch's dream. Sponsorships allowed for greater resources to be shared at the events, like bait and gear, while a freshly-wrapped truck banner and greater social media and online traffic increased awareness of the organization.

But it isn't the number of fishing poles or live minnows that generates hurdles.

“The tough part – the biggest problem – is getting volunteers,” he said.

Getting others involved

Consistently, it has been Karch's passion that affords him the energy to maintain this organization. The manner by which he assembles these events, from finding volunteers to build up and tear down, is nothing short of impressive. As a nonprofit, Karch has worked hard to grow the awareness and success of the organization, but it's difficult to define the distinction between Learn 2 Fish With Us and the man responsible for its birth. The formerly fulltime professional angler – with only 20 hours in his own personal boat during the 2018 season – still puts in close to 500 hours a year toward the kids who learn from his program. To strain the heart, and expect it to keep living the same, is an impossibility.

Though an uphill battle, Karch assures me that what Learn 2 Fish With Us needs is simply a transplant. Somebody or a

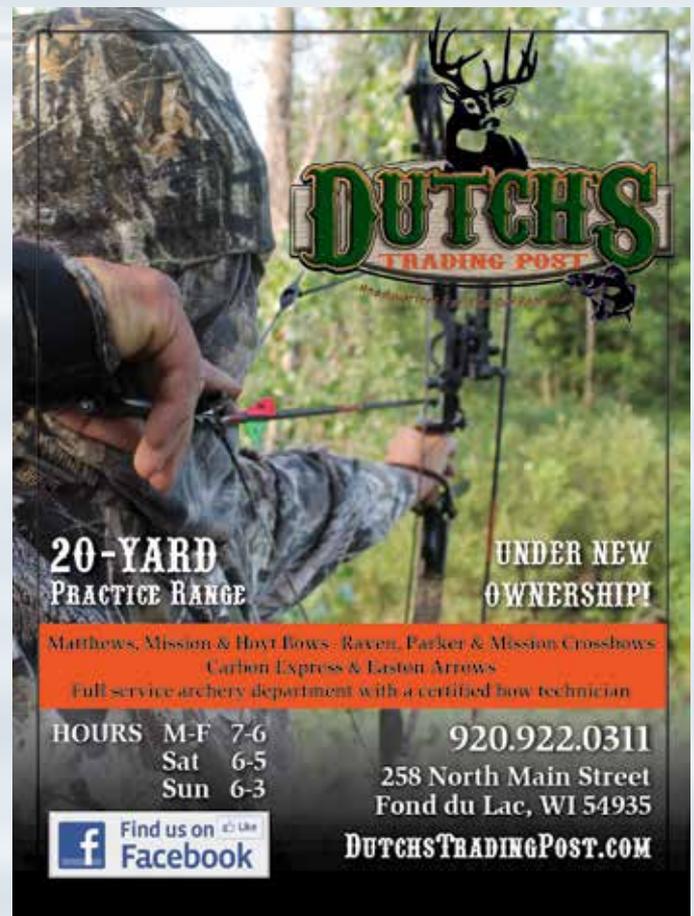
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Karch educating another group of children about safety on the water while fishing at Menominee Park in Oshkosh.



group of ‘somebodies’ to continue the passion and devotion to fishing, and keeping youth involved. From high school fishing teams to retired veterans, or stay-at-home parents, anyone who has time and wouldn’t mind getting a few more hours fishing – is encouraged to help volunteer with seminars.

Word on the street is that it’s contagious.

“I’ve had a good life. We’ve worked hard. I just love doing this, love the sport, and I want to make a difference,” said Karch. “Because, the greatest sport of all time? It’s fishing.”

As for making a difference, Learn 2 Fish With Us has hosted between 4,000 to 5,000 kids a year, totaling 35,000 attendees overall across more than 250 seminars. That’s 35,000 more people out breathing the fresh air, engaging in the medicine and madness that is fishing.

As my conversation with Karch waned to its conclusion, he mentioned one more noteworthy thing. When trying to

keep the kids attentive and engaged, talk to them about their fishing goals and always stress “the big fish.”

Why do we carefully tie every knot? The big fish.

What is the reason for using this bait rather than that bait? The big fish.

Why is it important to set the hook, and keep your rod tip up? The big fish.

In this way, the uncertainty of every cast and what it will produce boils down to the attention to treat every cast as if it were the one – the one that would land you the biggest, most exciting, most impactful fish, yet. The one you don’t want to lose.

It became clear to me that Karch was practicing what he preached. Working diligently, teaching thoughtfully, and treating all of his attending kids as if they were the big fish.



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