The Joe Humphreys' Fly Fishing Stream School

Program Overview and Educator Guide

Youth Fly Fishing Curriculum - Ages 6-17 - Inspired by the Methods of Joe Humphreys

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Our Mission

The Joe Humphreys Fly Fishing Stream School teaches young people to fly fish using the methods and values of Joe Humphreys - giving every student a lifelong pursuit, a deep connection to nature, and a personal stake in protecting the waters they fish.

In short: passing Joe Humphreys' method - and his love of the water - to the next generation of anglers and conservation stewards.

Who Is Joe Humphreys?

Joe Humphreys was born on January 19, 1929, in Curwensville, Pennsylvania, during the depths of the Great Depression. In 1935, his father moved the family to State College, Pennsylvania, in pursuit of education and opportunity. Joe later called it a "weird twist of fate" - because State College sat at the heart of Pennsylvania's limestone country, a region fed by cold, clear springs that produce some of the finest wild trout habitat in the eastern United States.

Winding behind the Humphreys family property ran Spring Creek. In that same year, 1935, six-year-old Joe stood at its edge with his father. Neither had ever fished or held a fly rod. They fished worms on bamboo rods. On Joe's very first cast, he felt a tug and pulled - and a trout sailed up over his head and landed in the weeds behind him. He scrambled through the grass and captured it: an eight-inch wild brown trout. "I was just in awe of the beauty of that fish," he recalled. "The halos. The spots. This is where it all started." His father, who had never fished before either, hooked one too - and threw the rod down and brought it in hand over hand. A foot long. "We were both so proud of those fish." Joe's mother put them in a pan. "I still today have a trout sandwich," Joe says. "It was the best sandwich I'd ever had in my life."

"To catch a brook trout in all its regal beauty - it's gold to me." - Joe Humphreys

From that moment, Joe was consumed. Every day, out of school, he was on his bicycle - fly rod across the handlebar, three peanut butter sandwiches in a bag, heading for Spring Creek or one of its tributaries. "As I got older it was five peanut butter sandwiches," he says, "because I had a great appetite." Alone, across hundreds of sessions on a tributary called Thompson Run, he taught himself to read water, observe trout, and tie flies from whatever he could find. The Depression made this more than recreation - "What we caught and what we shot, that's what we ate. That's just the way it was." Every fish meant something. Nothing was wasted. Everything was learned.

That same first morning, Joe's father had never fly fished. He came along simply to be with his son. Whatever his equipment was, Joe could never remember it. What he never forgot: his father hooked a foot-long fish, threw the rod down on the bank, grabbed the line with his bare hands, and pulled the fish in hand over hand. He had no idea how to fish. He just wanted to be there. That is still the heart of this program.

As Joe grew older, he crawled to the stream. Literally - on his belly through the morning dew-soaked grass. 'I learned to crawl because when I walked up to the stream, the fish went everywhere.' He watched from behind stones. He tracked a single trout for days, observing its feeding position, its movements, what it ate. Observation Before Action did not begin as a teaching philosophy. It began as a boy on his belly in the grass.

At age nine, Joe caught his first fish on a fly - by accident. A Trico hatch was on Spring Creek. He had only his father's wet flies from a mail-order catalog, all size 10s and all wrong for the hatch. He tied one on and it floated instead of sinking. A nine-inch trout grabbed it. The lesson: sometimes the fish want something you did not intend. Pay attention.

"Fishing was the catalyst that moved me from the depths of despair into a whole new life." - Joe Humphreys

An Athlete, a Teacher, a Legend

Joe's life has never been confined to a stream. He boxed and wrestled competitively, lettered in both in the same season at Penn State University - a rare achievement. He later coached wrestling. He taught physical education courses including advanced ice skating, racquetball, weightlifting, personal defense, judo, and bowling. During filming of the documentary Live the Stream (2018), he was still doing push-ups and crunches in his basement each morning. "I still pump steel," he says. "Don't sit and watch the tube. Stay busy. Move."

For 19 years Joe taught the fly fishing program at Penn State, succeeding his mentor George Harvey - the man who created the tuck cast and built the first accredited fly fishing course in the United States. "George Harvey had more insights than anybody in the United States or the world," Joe said. "I learned so much from him, and we were great friends." Joe earned Harvey's respect early. As a young man at Fisherman's Paradise on Spring Creek - the famous one-mile stretch where 3,000 fishermen crowded in on opening day - Joe had developed his own fox fur shrimp pattern on a size 18 hook, imitating the freshwater shrimp the trout actually ate while everyone else threw streamers. "I was catching fish after fish. People would try to follow me and find out what I was using. I would remove the fly, have it in my hand, and start running - and I'd have people chasing me like the Pied Piper to find out what I had." Harvey watched him work one day, a group of Pennsylvania dignitaries in tow. He pulled Joe aside afterward. "You're doing fine, son," Harvey told him. "No compliments from George Harvey," Joe says with a smile. "That was the highest praise."

That succession was not easily given. For years whenever Joe encountered George Harvey on a stream, Harvey refused to share anything. 'He wanted to catch fish - get lost, kid, basically.' When Harvey prepared to retire from Penn State in 1970, he looked around and recognized Joe as the only person fit to carry the program forward. He taught Joe everything: the tuck cast, leader construction, the full night game. Harvey's years of silence were not unkindness. He was watching first. Observation Before Action.

Joe has fished in nearly every state, competed in world fly fishing championships, produced the first fly fishing series ever aired on ESPN, and written multiple books that have shaped the sport. He holds Pennsylvania's fly-caught brown trout record: a 16-pound, 34-inch fish taken at

one in the morning on a large stone fly pattern, after three years of stalking the same fish. He has taught thousands of students, from presidents and Olympic coaches to young people who had never seen a trout stream.

“I will continue to teach until I finally reach the bottom of that mountain.” - Joe Humphreys

“How lucky I’ve been to make the love of my life my profession.” - Joe Humphreys

What Is The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School?

The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School is a youth fly fishing education program designed for young people across the country. It is not affiliated with any university. It exists to bring the philosophy, techniques, and values of Joe Humphreys - one of America’s great fly fishing educators - to the next generation of anglers.

The program is built on a simple belief: when a young person stands in a trout stream, reads the water, ties on a fly they made themselves, and catches a fish - something changes in them. They are connected to nature in a way that no classroom can replicate. They have a skill they will carry for a lifetime. And they become, almost inevitably, stewards of the water they fish.

The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School can be delivered by physical education teachers, youth program directors, scout leaders, fishing guides, outdoor educators, and community volunteers - anyone willing to earn Harvey Leader certification. No prior fly fishing experience is needed to start training; nobody leads students until they have passed clearances, the 2-day training, the skills assessment, and an observed teach-back. The strong teacher who is not yet a strong caster can certify as an Assistant Harvey Leader and lead lawn, knot, bug, and Steward blocks while the on-water casts come along.

Every session runs at 1 instructor per 5 students (1:3 at dusk) with a minimum of two cleared adults on site, every Harvey Leader holds Pennsylvania child protection clearances, and all gear is loaned free.

Program Goals

Goal 1: Give Every Young Person a Lifelong Pursuit

Joe Humphreys, still fishing and teaching into his nineties, says it simply: “The secret to life is having something to look forward to.” Every student who completes even a one-hour Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School clinic gains skills that will provide decades of enjoyment, purpose, and connection to the natural world. This is not about producing expert anglers. It is about opening a door that stays open forever.

Goal 2: Use Fly Fishing to Build Community

Young people are the future of fly fishing - and of the conservation work that keeps the streams worth fishing.

In the documentary Live the Stream, Joe works with a group of young people from the city who have never fished. One girl catches her first trout and says: “My first trout! Oh my gosh - this is just amazing. I’m in a whole another space.” That moment is what The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School exists to create.

Goal 3: Grow the Next Generation of Conservation Stewards

Fly fishers are among the most effective conservation advocates in America because they have a personal stake in clean water. A young angler who learns to identify aquatic insects, read

water quality through the presence of brook trout, and understand the connection between a healthy stream and healthy drinking water will advocate for those resources their entire life.

“You’ve got a challenge. You’ve got to take care of those streams that you so enjoy - and this land - because there are a hell of a lot of people out there who won’t protect it.” - Joe Humphreys

Goal 4: Heal Through Nature

Fly fishing has proven therapeutic value for people carrying difficulty - veterans, young people from stressed environments, anyone who struggles to find stillness. Joe Humphreys has volunteered for years with Project Healing Waters, a national program using fly fishing to rehabilitate injured and psychologically wounded veterans. A veteran participant in Live the Stream describes it: “Fly fishing is the greatest therapy in the world. I can get out of a bad state of mind and reel myself back in.”

The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School honors this dimension of the sport. The stream does not care what you’ve left behind on the bank. It only asks you to be present.

Live the Stream: Required Viewing

The 2018 documentary film Live the Stream follows Joe Humphreys at age 86 across the streams, forests, and memories of a lifetime. It is required viewing for all Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School instructors and strongly recommended as an opening activity for any multi-day program.

The film documents Joe’s greatest conservation achievement - the saving of Spring Creek through the founding of Spring Creek Trout Unlimited and the rerouting of Thompson Spring around the contaminated Duck Pond. It shows him fishing with veterans through Project Healing Waters. It follows his decades-long quest for a 20-pound brown trout. It records him teaching children from the city who have never seen a wild fish. And it captures things no written curriculum can: the way water sounds at night, the feel of a heavy fish pulling against your rod, the silence of a man standing in a stream thinking of someone he misses.

“Every day on the stream is an adventure. And as a teacher, if I’ve passed some good things on - not only the how-to, the nuts and bolts, but an appreciation of nature itself - that’s what it’s all about.” - Joe Humphreys

All instructors should watch the film before their first session. The stories, quotes, and scenarios woven throughout The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School curriculum draw directly from it.

Program Formats

1. One-Hour Clinic

A focused introduction for school visits, community events, scout outings, or youth group programs. Covers the short stroke cast, Davy knot, and stream ecology basics. Can be conducted entirely on a lawn with no water access required.

2. Weekend Intensive

A Friday evening through Sunday program. Progressive instruction over three days: equipment and casting on Friday evening, nymphing and water reading Saturday morning, advanced casts and dry fly Saturday afternoon, and a conservation synthesis on Sunday. Best suited for youth groups, camps, and structured weekend retreats.

3. Weekend Series
Six sessions - one each weekend, or one full weekend a month for families traveling farther. Each session pairs with the weekly homework sheets, building from grip and first knots to a capstone session on real water. Free, like every Stream School program.

4. Week-Long Summer Camp
Five full days of fly fishing immersion for ages 6-17. Covers stream ecology, fly tying, all major Humphreys casting techniques, nymphing, dry fly fishing, night game concepts, conservation action, and a graduation field trip. The most comprehensive delivery of The Joe Humphreys' Fly Fishing Stream School curriculum.

5. School & Classroom Integration
Curriculum modules designed for physical education, environmental science, biology, and outdoor education programs. Can be delivered across a semester (10-15 sessions) or as a concentrated multi-day field experience. Adaptable to any geographic region with access to coldwater streams and the warmwater track elsewhere.

Student Age Tiers

Age Tier	Ages	Focus	Recommended Rod (program loaner)
Minnow	6-10	Short stroke, roll cast, basic knots	Echo Gecko 3-4 wt or equivalent
Brook Trout	11-13	Tuck cast, bow-and-arrow, nymphing	Redington Path II 4 wt 8'6" or equivalent
Brown Trout	14-17	Downer-Upper cast, dry fly, night game intro	Redington Path II 5 wt 9'0" or equivalent

Three tiers. Adults who want to learn the method become Harvey Leaders: the certification course is the adult pathway, and it is free.

Conservation at the Core: The Spring Creek Story
Conservation is not a separate topic in The Joe Humphreys' Fly Fishing Stream School - it runs through every lesson. This follows directly from Joe Humphreys, who has spent more than six decades fighting for the streams he loves.

When highway construction in the 1960s rerouted a road through State College, it pushed the stormwater from a retention basin called the Duck Pond - collecting motor oil, chemicals, road salt, and everything that washes off a city's streets - directly into Thompson Spring and Spring Creek. Water temperatures climbed into the 80s and 90s. The wild trout vanished. "This was my treasure," Joe said. "This was my life. And I saw it going." He did not accept it.

"I don't know how I can do this," he told himself. "I don't know what I'm going to do. But I'm going to change this somehow." With five friends at a kitchen table and a jackhammer borrowed from a construction crew boss named Whitey, he founded Spring Creek Trout Unlimited and built a diversion pipe that carried Thompson Spring around the Duck Pond entirely. It took sixty years of effort to complete - finishing in 2022. There is now a plaque on a stone at the Duck Pond marking the accomplishment.

“It was a dream coming true. I saw the salvation of Spring Creek.” - Joe Humphreys

This story is taught in full during the Week-Long Summer Camp conservation session. It is the living proof that one person’s love for a stream can change its fate.

The Brook Trout: Program Symbol

Brook trout are The Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School’s symbol - Pennsylvania’s state fish, and one of the most pollution-sensitive freshwater species in North America. They cannot survive in degraded water. Their presence means the stream is healthy. Their absence is a warning.

As Joe explains: “Brook trout serve as fabulous bio-indicators for our mountain streams. In many of the same streams where brook trout live, we get our drinking water. They are an early detector of poor water quality.”

Teaching young anglers to love brook trout is one of the most direct paths to creating lifelong conservation advocates. A student who has held a wild brook trout in cold water will remember that moment - and what it took to keep that water clean - for the rest of their life.

The “Look Up” Moment

One of Joe’s most beloved teaching habits is a simple instruction he gives at some point during every fishing day. He stops, turns to whoever is with him, and says: “Look up. You’ve been staring at the water from the moment we made the first cast. I’d like to stop and live the moment.”

He might point out a red-wing blackbird. The shape of clouds. Sunlight on a wet log. The sound of the riffle around the bend. “Those are cherished moments,” he says. “The good Lord has given us such a beautiful place to fish. When you don’t take time to recognize it - to appreciate it, be thankful - you’re missing part of the game.”

Every Joe Humphreys’ Fly Fishing Stream School session includes a deliberate Look Up moment. It is not a pause in the curriculum. It is the curriculum.

For Instructors

Before Your First Session

Required: Watch Live the Stream (the full documentary) in its entirety

Required: Read the full Harvey Leader Training Guide and the Harvey Leader Certification Standard

Required: Practice all five casts - short stroke, roll cast, bow-and-arrow, tuck, and Downer-Upper - until fluent

Recommended: Visit your teaching stream at least once before bringing students

Required: Read all student handouts before distributing them

The Teaching Standard

Joe Humphreys taught tens of thousands of students over nearly seven decades. Asked what makes the difference between a student who gets hooked on fly fishing and one who doesn’t, he answers without hesitation: “Nothing succeeds like success. When you catch a fish, you’re off and running. You never forget.”

Your primary job as an instructor is to give every student an early win - a cast that lands where they aimed, a knot tied from memory on the first try, or a fish caught and held briefly before it swims away. That moment is everything. Build toward it deliberately.

“What happens to people if they don’t have proper instruction and they don’t have any direction and they try it unsuccessfully on their own? Frustrations build. But when you have instruction - and nothing succeeds like success - when you catch a fish, you’re off and running. You never forget.” - Joe Humphreys

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