



**Currier 3rd in Spain
Jackson angler medals, helps lead Fly Fishing Team USA to eighth.**

By Michael Pearlman

Jeff Currier crawled, swam chilly waters cradling netted fish and risked intestinal illness in an attempt to reach the pinnacle of his sport.

Utilizing every bit of knowledge he has accumulated in six years as a member of Fly Fishing Team USA, Currier brought home a bronze medal at the World Fly Fishing Championships in Spain held June 14-18. His incredible angling performance helped lift Team USA to eighth place at the championships, the Americans' best finish ever.

"It helps to have gotten a feel for this type of fishing from previous competitions," said Currier, the flyfishing manager at Jack Dennis Outdoors Shop on the Town Square. "As soon as I saw that this year was similar to France (where last year's World Championships were held) I said, 'This is it.' I felt confident from Day One."

Demonstrating a willingness to do whatever it took to sneak up on spooky brown trout, Currier spent hours at a time on his hands and knees and even swam across a river in an attempt to secure a better fishing location and keep himself in the medal hunt.

The Americans consisted of Currier, Jackson residents Jay Buchner and Ed Opler, Pete Erickson of Boise, Idaho, and Sam Paul Mavrakis of Sheridan. Team members fished five, three-hour sessions on four different rivers and a lake in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain. It was Currier's performance on the final two "beats" which helped him become the first American to ever win a medal in the high-pressure international competition.

Heading into the fourth beat, Currier found himself sitting in the top 10. His assignment that day was the Aragon River, which had been fishing poorly for the entire competition.

"It was nerve-racking," Currier said. "ESPN was there taping, there were a bunch of spectators, and they were too close to my bank. After about 15 minutes of not catching a measurable fish, I said 'screw it' and swam across the river to get to the other side where there were no people. I started fishing soaking wet and managed to get a fish right away."

Currier landed three brown trout after making short casts while crawling on his hands and knees, swimming back across the river with a fish in his net each time he landed one so it could be measured.

"I was holding the net really carefully, because I was worried the fish were going to jump out," Currier said. "Next time I'm leaving my waders at home and bringing a snorkel." Currier paid a price for his commitment, coming down with giardia after crossing the stream so many times.

After his creative performance on the Aragon, Currier was in third place heading into his final beat on the Pyrenees Lake. Despite the fact that all of his teammates and the majority of the other anglers had been blanked at the lake, Currier remained optimistic.

"I felt pretty good that a miracle was going to happen," he said.

Currier caught a nine-inch fish on the lake beat in 14 minutes. Throughout the competition only 20 fish were landed on the lake among the 100 anglers who fished there.

"That was one of the most important fish I've caught in my entire life," Currier said. Had Currier been skunked, he would have received the lowest possible score, dropped out of the top-10 and ruined any opportunity for bringing home a medal.

Though Currier has competed with the team since 1998, he said he didn't approach this year's competition differently than he had in previous years. The Victor, Idaho, resident did admit to stopping on the Wilson Bridge each day on his way home to practice Polish nymphing, but he didn't use the technique.

"After I got over there, I realized it was upstream, dry-fly fishing [that] is my cup of tea," Currier said. "I knew that the only people that could smoke me were the French, Italians and the Spanish. That's their specialty and they're just incredible."

The French repeated as team champions for the fifth straight year, followed by the Belgian and Spanish teams.

The American anglers quickly discovered that the unique-looking brown trout they were stalking behaved differently than the trout common to the waters around Jackson Hole.

"The fish were very difficult, and there didn't appear to be great numbers of fish in the water," Buchner said. "There were no grayling in Spain at all so you had to rely on a bunch of very spooky brown trout. One of the coarse fish, the barbel, was very common in those rivers and they were also extremely spooky. If you scared the barbel, it would then scare the trout. Around here, you're scaring trout that are scaring other trout."

Currier and his teammates decided to keep things simple, using an elk hair caddis and a small, size-16 olive baetis dropper tied by Buchner, which they discovered was effective before the competition started.

"If you know something's working you don't want to waste time changing flies, so I just stuck to it," Currier said.

The rest of Fly Fishing Team USA also performed solidly as the American team continued its improvement against the dedicated and sponsored European squads. Erickson, who was making his World Championships debut, surprised himself with a 20th-place finish. The winner of last year's fly-fishing competition at the ESPN Great Outdoors Games was awed by the talent at the competition.

"It was really eye opening as far as how good the anglers were," Erickson said. "That hit me in the face really hard. I felt really good to have done as well as I did. People were just mind-bogglingly good fisherman, so the only way you can finish up high is if you do everything right and they slip up."

Fly Fishing Team USA has come a long way since finishing last in the 1997 competition held in Jackson Hole. Last year the team finished 12th in France, its best finish ever prior to this year's competition. This year, the team was focused on cracking the top 10.

"We're getting more knowledgeable with competitions and getting some better anglers and teaching them some skills we've been learning over the years," said Buchner, who joined the team with Currier in 1998. Buchner was a victim of some bad luck, including drawing a lake beat where 17 of the 20 anglers in his group failed to land a fish. On Buchner's final beat, a cloudburst 10 minutes into his session muddied the already-challenging Aragon river.

"There was a half inch of visibility; It was like fishing in cappucino," Buchner said.

Jackson resident and fly fishing icon Jack Dennis coached the team, offering invaluable organizational skills to help the anglers keep track of which techniques and flies were working.

"He did a nice job of keeping everyone focused and putting together a game plan," Buchner said. "It can be tough keeping track of all the information, and he did a good job of that."

Currier was awarded his medal at an emotional closing ceremony where he received an enormous bouquet of flowers while the national anthem was played. Both Currier and the rest of the American squad were praised by the Europeans, including some of the same fisherman who wrote off the Americans six years ago.

"We worked really hard with each other to finish in the top-10. That team accomplishment was a great experience," Erickson said. "The rest of the world was like, 'These guys are really coming on.'"