



California Confluences

Profiles in Fly Fishing
Interviewer: Bud Bynack

Michael Malekos

WHILE THERE ARE TIMES when fly fishing is the most efficient way to catch fish, most fly fishers know that catching is only part of a sport whose rewards extend far beyond tallying up totals of fish brought to hand. Most of us are content simply to enjoy these good things as they come to us, but there are a few rare individuals who want to make such experiences available to others. Michael Malekos is one of those individuals. Both as a contributor to this magazine and as the creator of the Casting A Rise Foundation, he has found ways to give back to a sport that has so much to give.

Bud: The name of this column is “California Confluences,” and I’m always curious about the currents that have brought people to California and to fly fishing here. Where is your family from, when did you start fishing, and when did you start fly fishing? What appealed to you about it then, and as time went by, what sustained or renewed your love of the sport?

Michael: I was born in San Francisco, where I attended high school and college. My parents are second-generation Americans, the descendants of Greek immigrants with a colorful history. Although they did not know one another at the time, both sets of grandparent’s immigrated from the island of Crete.

As a child, my mother’s father captivated me with stories from his days working in the coal mines of Utah. Living conditions were hard, and fitting in was harder. I had trouble sleeping for weeks after hearing his tales of Klu Klux Klan members sporadically appearing in camp and burning the tents of Greek and black miners. Workers were paid in company currency that was accepted only at company stores. To break away from this indentured servitude, my grandfather played poker in the evenings and used his winnings to move to California.

While most Greek immigrants at that time secured jobs in coal mines, my father’s father raised and sold livestock.

How a Greek was able to secure land on a Ute Indian Reservation during the 1920s is still a mystery, but that is where my father was born.

As their ranching operation expanded, the family migrated to California. Livestock was transported by train cars and unloaded in Escalon, where the family ranch was established. With five thousand head of sheep and over four hundred head of cattle, grazing land was always sought out and in demand. Sheep were constantly being moved to greener pastures, often relocated to the hills surrounding Half Moon Bay and Pacifica.



MICHAEL MALEKOS STRONGLY ADVOCATES THAT FLY FISHERS GIVE BACK TO OUR SPORT AND OUR FISHERIES. HE HAS LONG PRACTICED WHAT HE PREACHES.

At one time, primarily due to the lack of predators existing there, my grandfather attempted to secure the grazing rights to Angel Island. Two of my uncles opened grocery stores along the avenues in San Francisco’s Sunset District, which is also where the family set up a second home.

My father and his brothers served in various branches of the U.S. military. One of my uncles was awarded a field commission at the Battle of the Bulge. German troops ran through his army battalion then bayoneted the fallen bodies. Shot in the shoulder, wounded, but still alive, my uncle then endured a bayonet to the thigh; all the while playing opossum. He was the day’s only American survi-

vor. Another uncle had his ship blown out from under him by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. Comatose for more than a week, he awoke and eventually married the nurse who cared for him.

My reason for sharing this family history is because these and other events have molded me into the man I am today.

My father was a bank/finance professional and real estate investor who also helped manage and operate the family’s working ranch. Weekends, I accompanied him back and forth from Escalon to the City. And although I spent most of my youth at the ranch, I didn’t realize my

packaged the tails into a shoe box. Once it was filled, I mailed it to a fly-tying company back East. The fly tyers paid me a nickel per tail. As a fourth grader, I wasn’t familiar with the term “double dipping.” I just knew business was good. I was selling countless squirrel tails while not appearing to make a dent in the population.

Although family members were mainly interested in deer and upland game bird hunting, I became engrossed in fishing. My home water was San Francisco’s Lake Merced. The lake was biking distance from my house, and by the time I was 12, I had it dialed in, rarely leaving there without a limit of trout in hand. Thinking back, Lake Merced was a big part of my life growing up. I fished there as a youngster, took my hunter safety course there, shot trap and skeet for the first time there, and rowed crew on its waters while attending the University of San Francisco. Now I look at it and am sad and disgusted. This one-time jewel has been violated and disrespected. But that’s another story.

Annual family trips to Yosemite National Park provided me with the opportunity to learn to fish moving water. It wasn’t until I was in my twenties and working for PG&E that I took up fly fishing. The company’s service territory spans from the Oregon border to Solvang, California, and during the early years of my career, I relocated often within it. Wherever I ended up, though, fishing was the one constant, an activity I found I could engage in almost anywhere. Eventually, I circled back to the Bay Area and ended up working at PG&E’s headquarters in downtown San Francisco. PG&E’s Hydro Operations Department maintained detailed maps showing ingress and egress to many of the state’s innumerable trout waters. Soon, I found myself spending lunch hours perusing the company’s dataset. This led to Friday night road trips with friends to fish targeted destinations. I then experimented with fly fishing these destinations.

I once read a description of me in a newsletter. The author was an engineer

exposure to both city and country life was unique until I became much older.

At nine years old, because I was too young and too small to be of much help around the ranch, my uncle handed me a box of .22 shells and a rifle, along with an offer to pay 20 cents for every ground squirrel tail I produced. Livestock was constantly getting injured by stepping into the squirrels’ large burrows. Soon I stuck up similar arrangements with neighboring ranchers and dairy owners. Squirrels ran amuck, I was a good shot, and my new venture became lucrative.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was my first introduction to fly fishing. After getting paid by the ranchers, I

at Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. “Mike’s the guy who fishes the heck out of Lower Burney Creek and casts as though the wind is always as his back.” I always liked the casting comment. However, he must have been watching me fish while the wind was actually at my back. My fly casting stinks! Regardless of how inept I may be, I find fly fishing aesthetically pleasing and find relaxation in the cast. I also enjoy being outside observing nature. The animals whose paths I have crossed while fly fishing are mind boggling. Additionally, some of my best memories with family and friends have come from fly-fishing trips. What probably sustains me the most though is that fly fishing is fun!

Bud: You’ve been contributing “Snapshot” articles to *California Fly Fisher* for some time now. All fly-fishing magazines run long-form destination-oriented features. How did the idea for a short, focused take on a destination and your experiences there come about?

Michael: Although variations of the following quote has been attributed to Mark Twain, Winston Churchill, and a host of others, I believe mathematician and writer Blaise Pascal is correctly credited with stating, “I have made this longer than usual because I have not had time to make it shorter.”

My idea behind “Snapshot” was simple. It began with a trip my son Eric and I took to Medicine Lake. Similar to a camera taking a photograph, a “Snapshot” would be a written synopsis of our experience fishing there. I thought readers would enjoy and benefit from a short, informative piece regarding fly fishing in various locations in California. In my articles, I share how to get there, how to fish, and most importantly, why I fish each body of water the way I do. My intent is to shorten an angler’s learning curve and to serve as a starting point for someone who has never visited the profiled water. I briefly talk about the area, equipment selection, how I’ve found the fish to act there, and discuss the rationale behind my approach. I limit my articles to one page. They are by design a quick read.

Lately, I have gone beyond the confines of “Snapshot,” especially if I think a topic is timely or of equal interest to fly fishers. For example, in this issue of *California Fly Fisher*, I talk about fishing dirty water. In past issues, I’ve discussed frostbite and fishing off the beaten path. I never give much thought to the length of my articles. I am grateful that Richard Anderson allocates a page in his magazine

to me, and I want to make the most of it. My writing is a reflection of my disposition and management style, which tends to be results oriented. If I were asked to link my writing style with a TV character, I would select Jack Webb as *Dragnet*’s Detective Sergeant Joe Friday: “Just the facts, ma’am.”

Bud: After a long career in finance, marketing, and business development, writing now seems to be a principal focus. What motivated the transition?

Michael: I enjoy writing. My first published articles were on the subjects of business management. Afterward, my writing focused on press releases, Web site text, and marketing pieces on behalf of two financial start-ups with which I was closely involved. The first article I wrote regarding fly fishing appeared in *California Fly Fisher* in 1999. “Guiding Eric” discussed teaching my then-six-year-old son to fly fish. Most writers take pen to paper because they think what they share would benefit others. For me, I think I have learned enough about fly fishing that could help anglers new to the sport.

However, my writing stopped a year after the *California Fly Fisher* article on Eric appeared. I was now the single father of a seven-year-old boy, Eric, and a three-year-old girl, Darien. As one can imagine, our lives changed. I had just left a 20-year career at PG&E to pursue a financial services start-up business venture, and my time became a precious commodity. Yet as a father, it was family first. I ensured that the three of us lived in the same home as before, that my children attended the same schools and associated with the same friends. I wanted to limit or at least to control to the best of my ability the disruptions to our lives.

Looking back, I think my efforts paid off. Eric recently graduated from U.C. Santa Barbara with a degree in pharmacology and is working at nearby Cottage Hospital. Darien will be graduating from U.C. Santa Barbara this June, earning her degree in environmental sciences in three years. Additionally, 10 years ago, I married my lovely wife, Annie. Annie was featured in a past article of mine on how to get your significant other into fly fishing. Together, we have a five-year-old

daughter named Alexia. When Eric’s interests refocused to hiking, Darien became my fly-fishing buddy. Now that she’s about to embark on her life adventure, Alexia’s stepping up. At five years old, she’s just about mastered the Fall River twitch. I hope one of my children demonstrates a hint of the passion I have for fly fishing. Otherwise, it’s unclear who is going to take me fishing when I’m older.

Bud: That career also has led you to develop a fishing-oriented philanthropical



MICHAEL MALEKOS AT FALL RIVER WITH HIS DAUGHTER.

organization, the Casting A Rise Foundation. What is it, what’s it do, and how is it funded?

Michael: The Casting A Rise Foundation blends my passion for fly fishing with a lifetime of philanthropy. The name comes from a painting by Adirondack artist Winslow Homer. And although the program was officially named this year, I have operated and self-funded it since 1999 and intend to apply for 501(c)3 status next year.

Casting A Rise sponsors fly-fishing excursions for auction at nonprofit fund-raising events. The foundation’s unique fee structure ensures that 100 percent of donations reach targeted organizations and charities. Organized trips are typically three days, two nights, and include accommodations, instruction, guided fishing, meals, and tackle. Stream selection is dependent upon season, as well as weather, water, and fishing conditions. I tailor each trip to the participant’s abilities and interests. Past beneficiaries include the Shriners Hospitals for Children, the San Francisco Food Bank, the National Parkinson Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, and the National Breast Can-

cer Foundation, to name a few. Auctioned trips have sold in the range of \$1,800 to \$2,300, and often to repeat bidders. The foundation never directly handles donated funds, but merely ensures the pledged donation is made.

Bud: Giving back to society and to the sport of fly fishing is not something everyone is motivated to do. What brought you to the realization of its importance?

Michael: I developed my fascination with fishing and enthusiasm for volunteering while attending Saint Ignatius College Preparatory in San Francisco. To participate in sports, students were required to perform community service. I was assigned to the Shriners Hospital for Children. Shriners provides specialized care and rehabilitation to kids with congenital conditions and complex medical needs.

My first task was to help coordinate a fishing trip for patients. I contacted and met with the concessionaire at nearby Lake Merced. It wasn’t until I presented the Shriners activity manager with an event contract that I learned everything I had

worked on was wrong. I was not aware that due to the scope and complexity of various medical treatments, patients were not permitted to leave the confines of the hospital. Instead of coordinating a fishing outing to the local lake, I was instructed to help drain the hospital’s indoor therapy pool and ensure it was refilled with fresh water and hungry trout.

The day of the trout derby caught my emotions by surprise. I was so overwhelmed by the experience that from time to time I had to leave the area to compose myself, then quickly return to bait a hook or help land a fish. The sight of physically challenged boys and girls fishing from gurneys and wheelchairs carried with it a life-long impact. Perhaps due to my youth or naïveté, I had anticipated sad and solemn faces. Instead, I encountered contagious excitement, loud laughter, and sheer fun being had by all.

The volunteer experience that brought me to tears also taught me that donating money isn’t the only way to benefit a cause. So please consider doing more for your favorite charity than just writing a check. While charitable donations may have an immeasurable impact, actions speak volumes as well. Volunteer your time.

Bud: If people want to follow in your footsteps, how should they get involved?

Michael: Often, the best fund-raising ideas come from putting your hobbies to work. When I began in 1999, it was just by donating three-day fly-fishing trips to organizations that I support. And although I didn't have a surplus of free time, I found that I made time to conduct these trips.

I think that my upbringing and parents' guidance opened my eyes to helping others. Jesuit teachers opened my eyes to philanthropy. And I in turn pass on these beliefs to my children. Up until my older children went off to college, our family regularly volunteered at the San Francisco Food Bank. Eric has volunteered at Habitat for Humanity, and over the summer, my daughter Darien taught English and helped build a drinking water plant in the jungles of Thailand. Annie and Alexia assemble clothing and toy packages for disadvantaged toddlers. In our house, we're taught to give back.

Do what you think is right. My parents instilled in me that if I see something I don't like or agree with, I should take action. However, regardless of one's intentions, sometimes your actions are not always well received. The most controversial philanthropic endeavor I ever became involved with centered on my efforts to ban the hunting of mountain lions in California. At the time, the state issued a total of 50 mountain lion hunting tags per year. I fostered a grassroots effort by first encouraging people, even those who didn't hunt, to purchase a hunting license, then enroll in the hunting tag lottery. One year, we secured three tags, burned them, and then rejoiced in the fact that three fewer cats would be taken that year. In 1990, Proposition 117, known as the Mountain Lion Initiative, was placed on a statewide ballot. It passed and banned the sport hunting of lions while allocating \$30 million per year to be spent annually for 30 years on acquisition of critical habitat. Although I celebrated the victory, it didn't feel like one, because many of the ranchers I knew ostracized or disliked me for my efforts. No pain, no gain!

Bud: It can seem like a daunting task for anyone, however, well motivated, to undertake a program like Casting A Rise. Have you had help?

Michael: Over the years, I have built up a network of friends and volunteers who help guide and provide use of their equipment for Casting A Rise. For example, the late Dave Brown of Trout Country

Fly Shop and Steve Vaughn of Vaughn's Sporting Goods alternated evening visits with guests to break bread and share stories and reports regarding local trout waters. I've come to realize that when supporting a worthwhile cause, it's not difficult to band resources together to make things work.

You also can partner with existing programs. Fund-raising has been a challenge for many organizations over the past few years. So ask yourself what charitable entity you would like to raise money for. Don't have a favorite charity? Then consider becoming affiliated with organizations such as Reel Recovery (reelrecovery.org), a national nonprofit organization that conducts free fly-fishing retreats for men living with all forms of cancer, Project Healing Waters (projecthealingwaters.org), dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled active military service personnel and disabled veterans through fly fishing, Casting for Recovery (castingforrecovery.org), which enhances the quality of life of women with breast cancer through cancer education, peer support, and fly fishing, and Cast Hope (casthope.org), which provides free fly-fishing and outdoor experiences to the children of Northern California.

Bud: What did your career in business teach you that is useful in the raising of funds for such organizations and the most efficient use of the money that gets raised?

Michael: Life and business lessons have taught me that once you have an idea, canvass your relationships. Get help from friends and ask them to donate either money or their time. I like to request gifts or donations in kind for itemized expenses. An itemized list lets everyone know how much money is needed and how a donation is going to be used. This way, donors who underwrite charities better understand how much their contribution helps.

Top-notch fund-raising organizations pass on at least 90 percent of funds raised to other charities, leaving just 10 percent for overhead. Casting A Rise Foundation continually surpasses this by ensuring transfer of 100 percent of the funds raised. However, as my organization grows, my model is not sustainable. I simply can't afford to continue funding this alone.

Years ago, I had a friend who was unexpectedly killed while mountain biking on Mount Tamalpais in Marin County. He was as zealous about sailing as I am about fly fishing. I, along with two colleagues at the time, contacted The Belvedere Cove Foundation and established a

sailing scholarship in his honor. Together with the Belvedere Cove Foundation, we raised \$10,000 and placed it into a self-perpetuating fund. Fund proceeds provide sailing lessons to disadvantaged youth. I intend to devise a similar model for Casting A Rise Foundation once nonprofit status is established. To expand the program, the proceeds from a dedicated fund will underwrite the expenses associated with sponsored fly-fishing trips.

Bud: You started your career working for Pacific Gas and Electric, one of the major stakeholders in many issues involving fisheries conservation and management in California. What advice do you have for conservation organizations seeking to engage PG&E and similar corporate stakeholders over such issues in order to arrive at mutually supportable solutions?

Michael: Stakeholder engagement is a key part of a corporation's social responsibility. I would advise conservation organizations to approach and initiate dialogue to express not only the environmental, but the social issues that matter to them the most. As California fly fishers, we can all learn a lot from Richard May, one of Cal-Trout's previous executive directors.

During my career at PG&E, I briefly served as a board-appointed officer of the company. Among other things, one of my tasks was to attend and serve as inspector of election at the company's annual meeting of shareholders. For several years, I witnessed Mr. May, through his submission of a shareholder proposal, request that a portion of PG&E's dividend (I think it was one cent at the time) be used toward the betterment and improvement of California rivers and streams. Although I don't recall the proposal ever passing, his actions created discussion and awareness at a senior, decision-making level within the organization.

Regardless of what we may sometimes think of the outcome or how we view it at the time, when reaching out to corporations, I strongly feel that laying the groundwork early on through education will eventually lead to desired results.

Bud: Let's get back to more personal matters. Where do you fish, and how often do you manage to get there? What's your idea of the trip of a lifetime?

Michael: I enjoy fishing the waters surrounding and adjacent to Burney Falls and go as often as I can. Last week, I fished the wild section of Hat Creek, Medicine Lake, lower Burney Creek, and

the McCloud River. I had four participants join me over an eight-day period, and everyone caught fish, even those who fly fished for the first time.

My all-time favorite place to fish, though, is the Pit River. Back in the day, I would head up to the Pit Friday evenings after work. I'd arrive in the very early morning, build a fire, lay out a tarp and sleeping bag by the river's edge, then awaken at sunrise and fish the hell out of it. Then do it all over again the next day before heading home. At that time, the Pit 5 powerhouse was manually operated. I would call the engineers there via PG&E's direct phone line to obtain information regarding the river's condition and flow reports before making the long drive north.

When thinking about the fishing trip of a lifetime, I think back to fly fishing for bonefish off Isla Culebra, an island municipality of Puerto Rico. The setting was beautiful, and the bonefish were large and plentiful. The highlight of the trip was landing a tarpon.

My idea of the trip of a lifetime is one that encompasses family and friends: fishing during the day and gathering to break bread and share stories at night. Every time I have done this is memorable, and those who partake often tell me afterward that they laughed for days. Good times.

Bud: Here we are at the traditional Silly Tree question: If you were a tree, what kind of a tree would you be?

Michael: I discussed this question with my son Eric the other day. I told him I was being interviewed by you and that all I knew for certain was that I would be asked the tree question. I also told Eric that I recalled a question along these lines asked years ago by human resource personnel to learn more about a candidate their company was considering for hire. Whenever I was asked the question during an interview, I would consider the qualities of whatever tree I was going to pick and how I would explain my choice. For example, if I wanted to convey that I was productive, I would select a fruit tree. If I wanted to show I was flexible, I would answer "A palm tree." Evergreen trees are steady. I wouldn't choose a cottonwood tree, because they are messy, and a weeping willow gives the impression of being sad. Typically, my go-to answer was "An oak tree, strong and reliable." Eric laughed then asked, "We'll, that was then. How are you going to answer the question now?" Today, the answer is easy. I'd be Shel Silverstein's Giving Tree. 🌳