

Colorado TU Holds “Flyathlon” Fundraiser... A Q&A with Founder Andrew Todd

While fishermen have always had a fondness towards beer, the only running most might experience after fishing was from the bigger wildlife trying to steal their catch. The last thing on anyone’s mind wading into a stream is how fast they can get back to the car. But in 2013, that all changed. Andrew Todd, founder of the Rocky Mountain Flyathlon, discovered the mission component that allows fishing and running to work together. The answer? Beer.

As an avid trail runner and fly fisherman, Todd found that beer is the constant variable among the two activities. Like Kevin Costner hearing “if you build it, they will come,” in *Field of Dreams*, Todd realized that if you have good craft beer, they will come. And in 2015, out of the cornstalks, people came. The 2015 Flyathlon saw over 50 participants and helped raised over \$22,000. With help from Colorado Trout Unlimited, all proceeds will be re-invested into projects dedicated to improving and restoring native species and fisheries throughout the Centennial State.

A long course and a short course were available for the various skill levels and the rules for the Flyathlon are simple: complete the prescribed trail run, catch and release a fish at any point during the run, take a picture of said fish on your race bib, and do it all as quickly as possible. The bigger the fish, the more time is taken off at the end of your run with a special double bonus for catching a native cutthroat trout. At the post race celebration, Colorado’s finest craft beers can be consumed by all, and prizes from various sponsors are given to top male and female flyathletes along with prizes for largest and smallest fish and for top fundraisers.

Q: What was the driving force behind starting the Flyathlon?

I was on a trail run behind the Flatirons with a good friend, and we got to talking about one of my recent running, fishing and craft beer evenings in the Sangre de Cristos. I told him that I called my personal multi-sport the Flyathlon (like the triathlon; except run, fish, beer instead of swim, bike, run). He stared at me incredulously, and then explained that he too had been combining these disparate disciplines for years. In that instant, I knew that there had to be other flyathletes out there just longing to belong.

The Flyathlon is just the organic coalescence of my three favorite things to do outdoors. I am fortunate enough to have a career that puts me all over the great state of Colorado. About 5 years ago, sick of not knowing where to explore after work, I purchased a complete set of *National Geographic* Trails Illustrated maps for Colorado. They’ve been in my car with my trail running

shoes and a craft-beer-loaded YETI ever since. I run to get way back to where the fish haven’t seen anybody for a while, so that I can catch and release a beautiful piece of Colorado’s natural history. The craft beer is used exclusively for post-run calorie replacement purposes...

Q: How has your personal and professional background helped you achieve success with the Flyathlon?

As a research biologist working on a diverse range of issues facing coldwater streams, I have seen a lot of really healthy ones and a lot of really trashed ones. Having the professional where-withal to identify the healthy waters has enabled me to identify courses where all of our flyathletes have a reasonable chance of catching a fish during a race. Knowing where the trashed ones are motivates me to do everything I can to raise awareness about these injured streams, and to raise money to try to find solutions for them.

Regarding my personal background, in a recent Meyers-Briggs assessment, I was identified as a strongly extroverted feeler. Usually, that combination lands people in prison. In my case, it has given me the confidence to reach out to everyone I possibly can to see how far I can take this crazy idea.

Q: What made you want to re-invest the proceeds into Colorado TU conservation projects?

My primary goal with the Flyathlon is to get people off the standard beaten paths and excited about exploring new waters for Colorado native trout that they wouldn’t ordinarily seek. I partnered with Colorado Trout Unlimited because they have the expertise and experience to ensure that the money that flyathletes raise will go as far as possible towards helping native trout. Over the years, Colorado TU has done a tremendous job engaging in on-the-ground, grass-roots stream protection and restoration projects.

Q: Why do you think it’s been such a popular event over just a few years?

Personally, I think that fly fishing is a sport that is on the brink of a full-blown renaissance. The traditional doctrine that fly fishing is a prohibitively expensive, elitist endeavor that requires mastery to be enjoyable, is dis-integrating. Instead, people are seeking out novel and approachable ways to just get out and fish. With the Flyathlon, we have created a casual and fun race environment for newbies to take the leap to learn how to fish. I think people appreciate that low-pressure opportunity. Oh, and they seem to enjoy the copious flow of diverse Colorado craft beers...

Q: What kind of participants is the Flyathlon geared toward?

The Flyathlon exists for people like Julie (Flyathlete #70; a.k.a The Okie Noodler). Julie moved from Oklahoma to Denver in the summer of 2014. She didn't know very many people, how to properly fly fish, own any real camping equipment, and the only beer she had ever consumed was at college tailgates and frat parties. She sent me a last minute message asking if she could join us in Saguache for the 2014 event and since my brother had recently bailed, I said yes. Julie showed up, and despite several other Flyathletes improbably stopping mid-race to help try to get her into fish, she finished the race fishless.

Fast-forward to 2015. Julie set an alarm to ensure that she was the first to sign up for the race, and come race day, it quickly became clear that she had spent the off-season learning how to fly fish. Crossing the finish line with an ear-to-ear grin and arms raised in the air, she triumphantly announced "I caught a fish!" and proceeded to shotgun a fine craft beer and show all of her Flyathlon friends the photo of the 5-inch native Rio Grande cutthroat trout that she had caught. She will now be a fly-fisherwoman forever.

Julie is the type of participant I want at every Flyathlon.

Q: What are the biggest challenges and rewards when doing these events?

The biggest challenge I have found in planning these events is identifying locations that have all of the many ele-

ments that make the Flyathlon special. Those factors include a course that has a diverse and robust fishery, plenty of safe access to fishing from the trail, and a large enough space to set up a tent city for our post-race craft beer revelry. Competitive events cannot be permitted in super-fishy designated wilderness areas, which I am fully supportive of, but it does make my job decidedly more difficult.

The biggest reward I have had in organizing this event for the past couple of years is hearing the many different ways that people mispronounce the word "Saguache." Seriously though, I most enjoy seeing 80 or so people from across the country (Maine, Wisconsin, Texas and Crestone, Colo.) come together in an obscure part of Colorado's San Luis Valley to fish in a creek that they never knew existed. And then hearing that they have come back to Saguache on their own to fish... That is special.

Q: What future plans do you have for the Flyathlon?

We had a significant waitlist for the 2015 event, and in the future, we would like to create enough races so that anyone who wants to participate can. We are envisioning a race series around the state of Colorado, where a dedicated individual would have the opportunity to catch each of our native cutthroat trout in competition within a given summer. We have also been in contact with folks around the country who are interested in starting Flyathlon events of their own (Maine, Idaho, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Texas, Pennsylvania). Ultimately, our goal is to get more people to explore, then to care about unheralded streams and the native fish that live within them. With the money that we raise through these events, we plan to give back to the resources that we depend on through trail and stream restoration projects.

There is a small stream loaded with native fish somewhere out there with your name on it. Go find it, fish it and work to make it better.

run. fish. beer.



PHOTOS BY TREVOR BROWN JR.