

Is sit or stand question like row versus wade?

Two defining aspects of Aaron Joel Sanders I hope will never change: his personal phone number emphatically spelling “I-O-W-A,” and that colossal, welcoming, coast-to-coast grin.

A.J. is another Jackson poster boy of what my studious Kelly journalist pal Ted Kerasote wryly labels “puer aeternus,” or “the eternal boy.” So far, “living the dream” with a ski instructor/ fly-fishing outfitter gig keeps the Sanders homestead prospering.

Recently I was curious about one variable of float fishing practiced throughout the West and thought A.J.’s observations would be good to explore. Along with his associate, recently minted state Rep. Andrew Byron, R-Hoback, he wrangles Jackson’s Orvis-endorsed Wyoming Angling Co. For many seasons A.J. has sidelighted as head instructor of Western Rivers Guide School by WorldCast Anglers.

Heavy as they were, the rugged post-World War II inflatable assault rafts got people floating. As newer foreign inflatables such as Avon, Achilles and Zodiac gained popularity for life saving and ship tenders, they were discovered to be sturdy enough to survive river tripping. Rowing frames added rigidity to inflatables and increased rowing control. More detailed devices included benches so fishermen didn’t straddle raft tubes while casting. The occasional frame-mounted swivel seat was real raft luxury.

The lingering complaint I immediately encountered when launching my first guide raft in the early 1970s was the difficulty most occasional fishermen had with casting while sitting down. This was with spin-cast, spinning and fly. As a youngster I’d fished while sitting on seawalls and docks as well as from boats both sitting and standing, so I didn’t identify with this issue.

When Rod Lewis dragged his early aluminum Wooldridge drift boat from Washington into Jackson, it was soon joined by Charlie Sands, who nabbed an Eastside fiberglass driftboat, and then Denny Becker, who set up shop as the first Lavro fiberglass drift boat distributor. This was the 1970s, and a decade earlier Keith Steele’s popular Oregonbuilt, high-side wooden drift boats were already in growing use on Montana and Idaho rivers such as the Yellowstone, Madison, Big Hole and Henry’s and South forks of the Snake River. Drift boats in Jackson Hole didn’t catch on instantly. Experienced river users knew the steep gradients and Bureau of Reclamation’s sudden irrigation season- ending dam flow shutdowns wouldn’t make life easy for hard hulls. Their great popularity was a casting platform for the bow fishermen to lean into and be braced safely if an unexpected current or obstruction suddenly distracted the boat.

Many were surprised by the sudden emergence of low-maintenance fiberglass drift boat availability and how the Snake River’s drift boat population really increased. Soon, rear casting braces were added so both bow and stern fisherman could stand and presumably be more comfortable casting. The “Rocky Mountain” style drifter positioned casters in the bow and aft. Many Northwestern drifters had two anglers in the bow with the stern empty.

Drift boat evolution continued, and it wasn’t long before lower-sided crafts began to appear. These supposedly caught less wind and made slipping under low railroad flatcar ranch bridges easier. Bruce Koffler began building aluminum drift boats in the early ’70s and made some prams for northern California and Oregon steelheaders. Bruce was encouraged to stretch his pram into a slightly longer low-profile drift boat. In the early 1980s, Ralph Headrick, a Jackson mechanic and veteran fiberglass surfboard shaper, and I introduced a low-profile, 14.5-foot fiberglass fishing boat we called the South Fork Skiff in honor of our favorite portion of the Snake: the South Fork in Wyoming. (The Henry’s Fork in Idaho also is referred to as the North Fork.)

Now, we were right back to a sturdy fishing platform that was easy to maneuver and had great visibility for

average rowers, and in which the fishermen were seated.

“How has that worked out?” I asked A.J., who has emphasized that the majority of his team operates either refurbished original South Fork Skiffs or the latest tricked-out versions produced by Adipose Boatworks of Helena, Montana.

“Initially there was a little resistance to going from a stand-up drift boat my longtime clients were accustomed to, but it hasn’t been a deal breaker,” A.J. explained as we inspected an extensive swath of the Green River in fellow WAC guide and handy boat modifier Harry Tebay’s updated South Fork Skiff. “Where I think the fishing difference is the seated caster makes a straightforward and more accurate presentation ahead than the standing angler who constantly is casting ‘down’ to the water,” A.J. said.

His response caught me by surprise, as I hadn’t operated a regular drift boat with any regularity in many years. But that observation made sense.

“Fishing two people on a Western river in a drift boat presents less of a boater challenge if both are equally able casters,” A.J. said. “But trying to keep both anglers in equally good water all the time is still very hard.

“But the ultimate way to spend a day of drift boat fly-fishing is to have one angler in the bow of a South Fork Skiff. I think that’s the greatest Western fly-fishing experience I can think of and what our group strives to provide.”

I then was entertained by numerous stories from A.J. and Harry, who’ve encouraged their longtime clients to consider going fishing alone instead of dragging somebody else along. The enthusiasm most of these anglers expressed was startling, with one client adding, “Guess I’ve wasted a lot of time and money bringing those other folks all these years.”

The low-profile fishing platform is successful when two requirements often very hard for average fishers are met: short, accurate casts. Our skiff design came from the way Ralph and I both like to fish. Getting as close as possible before casting means less room for error. Wading anglers present flies well above the spot they are targeting. A caster from a moving boat doesn’t have that luxury. It’s urgent to go to the spot right now.

When testing the pair of prototype hulls Ralph designed, the craft were much more stable with fishermen seated and not moving around.

Remember that a Bruunsize- person standing in a drift boat yoke unknowingly can add weight to the right side and totally upset the balance/angle of the boat, thus making rowing very hard. I recognize this fact and attempt in any craft, whether a drift boat or flats skiff, to stay centered. But that lesson doesn’t come easy to everyone.

At the end of our 12-hour fishing outing that featured plenty of fresh Sublette County air, mosquitoes and sunshine, the standing-versus- sitting discussion was summarized by one of Harry Tebay’s favorite good ol’ West Virginia expressions: “You take your beatin’ your way and I’ll take mine my way!”

Paul Bruun writes every other week on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors. Contact him via columnists@jhnewsandguide.com.



Aaron Joel Sanders, standing, emphasizes that Wyoming Angling Co. fishes low-profile South Fork Skiffs on western Wyoming (non-whitewater) streams. In the early 2000s, Sanders purchased columnist Bruun’s outfitting business. Bruun and Ralph Headrick began the skiff company in the early 1980s.

HARRY TEBAY / COURTESY PHOTO



Outdoors

Paul Bruun

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