

Nick Stoneman will fool you.

Unless you know him, Nick Stoneman will fool you.

You could size him up quick as a Polaroid and all the outside would be all in-focus: The tanned face, the blue eyes, the crowsfeet around them seamed-in like a baseball glove, the lean body resplendent in the hip-hugging slacks with the hounds-tooth check, the black and white summertime oxfords, the Chinese orange sport shirt — you get the picture.

On the evidence, you could figure him for a golf pro between pupils. Or a horse watcher between races. Or perhaps an airline pilot between flights.

You certainly wouldn't figure he was one of Madison's premiere trout fishermen.

And just as certainly, you would never ever figure Nick Stoneman was eighty years old.

"I rubbed elbows with a lot of old people," he says, "and sometimes I wonder what the hell I am still doing here."

We were sitting at Nick's kitchen table having a little talk and a little Old Style. Beyond the windows, birds fluttered around the feeders and asparagus ferns were hanging out for the season.

On the kitchen walls, there were framed photographs showing Nick with trout. Nick with friends. Nick with friends with trout.

Nick, in the flesh, doesn't really look all that much older than Nick in the photographs.

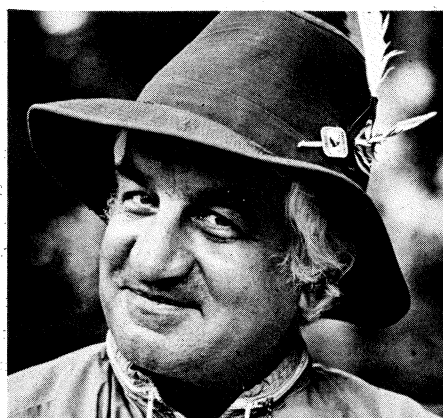
"I find," he says, "that the older I get, the more funerals I have to go to, but they aren't mine. Yet."

His wife, Madeline, Nick chuckles, is The One who has him figured out.

"My wife says," he says, "you retired too soon. And we're living too long."

What he retired from was Badger Sporting Goods, the firm he founded with Allie Vilberg back in 1941. That first year they did \$39,000 in athletic business to schools. Today, the firm now headed by Badger basketball great, John Kotz, does a \$2½ million

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school business.

"Maybe," Nick muses, "it's because I retired."

You would think that coming out of Mishicot up above Manitowoc and Two Rivers on the Lake Michigan coast, Nick was born with a fishpole in his hand, but he says he never got into fishing until he was in his 40's.

What he was doing up until then, he suggests, was preparing himself to appreciate fishing once he got around to it.

That included graduating from college at La Crosse, and marrying classmate Madeline O'Brien: (Last June 2 marked 57 years of marriage. "If we make it to 60," Nick promises, "I'm going to buy her the biggest trophy I can find.") Coaching football for two years at Beloit and Marshfield; coaching football four years at Monroe; and then joining Spaulding Sporting Goods as a sales rep "calling on" schools.

Also included in there was a year in professional baseball in the St. Louis Cardinal chain. Marshaltown, Iowa. 1925.

"I enjoyed playing baseball more than anything," Nick emphasizes, and then appends the cold eyed assessment of reality that separates the fly fishermen from the rest of humanity.

"But I could see I wasn't going to go very far in it. One season."

From those days, he still retains bone chips, a crooked arm and a love of the game that practically predestined him to bump into Dynie Mansfield along the way. Nick recalls first meeting Dynie in 1937 or '38. Dynie was coaching at Springfield, Ohio and Nick was working

out of Spaulding's Toledo store.

But their Outdoors Adventures didn't really take off until they both settled down in Madison and Nick's friend, Al Jennings got him into fly fishing. Al sold insurance to dentists all over the state and discovered that most of them fly fished to relax.

"Al also discovered," Nick adds, "most of Wisconsin's trout streams at the same time."

Al introduced Nick to the state streams and then Nick found trout fishing so relaxing he gave up golf.

He spends so much time on trout streams he admits he's addicted. Not only to the Big Green. And Mt. Vernon Crick. But waters beyond the horizon. The Brule. The New York in Wyoming. And his long-time favorite of all, The Madison River in Montana. He got so hooked on The Madison he fished it every summer for over 20 straight years.

He recalls being out there with Dynie one year and Dynie got into a trout bonanza in the middle of the river with wet flies. He stayed in that spot like he was nailed to it and was catching trout like crazy.

"Dynie had a load of trout," Nick said, "and when he pulled off his waders, he was all wet and I thought maybe he had shipped water out there or the waders leaked. 'No,' Dynie said. 'That's an inside job. With the trout hitting like that, I wasn't about to leave that spot. For anything.'"

Nick understands that kind of dedication and that explains why one of his favorite quotations is from the book *Fisherman's Bounty* edited by Nick Lyons.

"You will search far," Sparse Grey Hackle had written, "to find a fisherman to admit that a taste for fishing like a taste for liquor must be governed lest it come to possess its possessor."

"My wife," Nick admits, "reminds me of that quotation often."

The trout, though, could be the least of it. On the Madison River, he remembers, the sun would go down behind him and yet ahead of him it was still shining on the mountains.

"I'd sit there," he says, "and wish I was a painter."

Why not? Nick Stoneman probably has more time left than anybody. ■