



PURE GOLD

*by Tyler Frantz
photos by the author*

Waking to bitter mid-30s air temperatures, icy wind chills, and swollen, chocolate-brown creeks on the morning of the Southeast Region's 2019 Mentored Youth Trout Day did not seem like a golden opportunity for a boy, not yet 4-years-old, to catch trout. However, after a light breakfast and heavy bundling by Mother Frantz, our son Foster was eager to hit the stream and give it a try, despite Mother Nature's best efforts to spoil the fun.

Around 8:30 a.m., we arrived late to the scene at "Pappy's Farm," which hosts a Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission stocked trout waters section of the Lower Little Swatara Creek near Rock, Schuylkill County. My father maintains a handicap-accessible fishing ramp, which we recently repaired from winter flood damage a few weeks earlier, so the public could enjoy the Mentored Youth Trout Day and the regional opening day of trout season.

This was a nice, easy-access location to get my fish-loving son out for a bit, with the added insurance of a nearby retreat to Grandma's warm and cozy living room if required.

Approaching the ramp deck, we encountered a man in his early twenties, mentoring his grade-school aged brother. The younger sibling wasted no time in proudly lifting his metal stringer from the rushing water to reveal a beautiful golden rainbow trout he landed a short time before our arrival.

My son's eyes lit up with delight as he gazed upon the trophy fish. Its glistening, writhing body rattled the chain

link clasps. Sunlight illuminated its pink, striped flank. It was a gorgeous fish.

"Daddy, I want to catch an orange fish," he announced with youthful enthusiasm.

Apprehensively, I glanced at the high, muddy water and back at the fish on the stringer. It was the only bite anyone experienced here all morning. The odds were against us.

"Ok, buddy, we will try, but these water conditions are tough," I explained. "And, it is called a golden rainbow trout. You caught Rainbow Trout before. These are similar but a different color. They can be tricky to catch."

"Golden rainbow," he repeated without hesitation. "I am going to catch a golden rainbow, and we are going to mount it to hang on my bedroom wall."

The boy spoke with conviction, and I was nervous. I did not want to break his spirit, but I doubted we would have any luck, and I did not want to give him false hope. The water visibility was nearly non-existent. I had no idea if another golden rainbow trout was in the creek, and my hands were already numb.

"We will give it our best shot, bud," I said with forced optimism.

I eyed the creek again as I balled up a dab of the smelliest dough bait in my vest—garlic-scented with glitter to catch the light—and added it to his hook. Two splitshots completed the rig. I tossed it over the wooden railing and handed my son the rod.

At first, I had to coach him not to reel it back right away. He is always quick to crank.

“Let it sit. We need to give the fish time to find the bait. Just be patient, buddy. You are doing awesome,” I said with fatherly encouragement.

He took my advice, and I watched his line settle near the middle of the pool. Moments later, while chatting with fellow anglers, I glanced at Foster’s rod tip, which bounced subtly at first and then bounced again rapidly.

“Set your hook. You have a fish on there,” I said excitedly as I rushed to help him secure the fish. “Reel buddy, reel!”

He was giggling and squealing as he bore down on the reel’s handle. I soaked in the innocent look of joy and anticipation on his face as the drag worked on the trout. He was having a blast, and so was his dad.

When the fish splashed to the surface and dove again, both our eyes widened. We only caught a quick glimpse before the fish disappeared again



The author hands over the rod to his determined 3-year-old son after making the first cast.

into the stained water, but there was no mistaking the distinct color at the end of Foster’s line—bright orange. I could not believe it.

I quickly snapped into action and grabbed the net as my 3-year-old reeled in the fish of his dreams—a golden rainbow trout. Several tense seconds later, the fish was cleanly netted and wriggling on the wooden deck boards. My son was so excited that he jumped up and down, his footsteps echoing my pounding heart.

I hugged my little boy and smiled in disbelief. “Do you realize what you have just done?” I asked proudly. “I caught my golden rainbow!” he proclaimed with a grin larger than his little body. “And, we are going to mount him.” Who was I to disappoint?

My son’s fish was promptly dropped off at the local taxidermist, so this special memory could be preserved for the both of us. The taxidermist was kind enough to finish it in time for Christmas, and it now hangs on Foster’s bedroom wall.

Fishing has a way of strengthening a bond between loved ones, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share this experience with my son. The weather may have been less than ideal, and it was the only bite we received during our frigid hour at the stream, but I would not change a thing.

The father-son moment we shared together was just like Foster’s fish—pure gold. ☐



Foster wished he would catch a golden rainbow trout to mount for his wall. He made good on the catch, and Bruce Wilson’s Taxidermy, Lebanon, helped fulfill the second half of his wish.