

Yale Daily News

Published: Thursday, January 17, 2008

Migdalski furthers outdoors program

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Most students who climb the stairs or take the elevator to the fourth floor of Payne Whitney Gymnasium, turn left and head straight for the fitness center. But if, instead, they make a small detour to the right, they would find themselves in the office of Tom Migdalski. An expert in everything from fly fishing to skeet and trap, his office features trophies, plaques and mounted fish, alongside old issues of almost every fishing and outdoor sport publication imaginable — including at least three titles dedicated to saltwater fishing.

Migdalski, who heads the club sports program and runs the Yale Outdoor Education Center, said he aims to spread his passion about the outdoors and his affinity for fishing and shooting sports by sharing his positive experiences — and his love of the chase — with students, faculty and staff.

“It’s almost like there’s some evolutionary challenge and excitement of the chase — trying to outwit a game fish with the saltwater splashing on your face,” he explained. “To actually be able to catch your own fish takes time, planning and knowledge, and that challenge is very rewarding.

Migdalski, who teaches courses in skeet and trap and fishing at Payne Whitney and local colleges like Southern Connecticut, is following in his father’s footsteps by embracing outdoor sports. During his 50 years with Yale, the elder Migdalski, Ed, founded the Club Sports program, directed the outdoor recreation center and coached skeet and trap and fishing. Since his father’s retirement in 1984, Tom has taken over each of these positions.

“My own interests continued to develop after majoring in outdoor recreation in college and spending much of my life fishing and shooting,” he said. “Getting my own fishing boat has expanded my horizons and allowed me to strike out on my own. I’ve continued to progress and perhaps even outpace my father’s interest.”

In addition to publishing over 200 articles, 1000 photographs and 75 cover photos for various fishing and sporting magazines, Migdalski has authored a book: “The Complete Book of Shotgunning Games.” In the book, Migdalski explains the techniques used in sports like skeet and trap, in which shooters use shotguns to shoot clay trappings to compete in accuracy.

Rob Person GRD ’10, who is currently a co-captain of the skeet and trap team, said Migdalski’s expertise in fishing and outdoors makes for skilled coaching.

“We can be out there on the field, and if you miss a target, [Migdalski] can tell you missed it six inches over

the top, and that you should do this next time, which immediately fixes the problem,” Person said.

Although he had a solid foundation in outdoor sports growing up, Migdalski said he realizes most students at Yale have probably never taken up fishing seriously and even fewer have shot a shotgun at clay targets.

“People are growing up in cities and suburbs, and it’s much harder to connect with nature when you have to drive hours to a lake or shooting range,” he said. “The population is growing, and natural resources and open land are shrinking, and if that balance continues, fewer people will be exposed to the outdoors.”

The majority of students in the fishing club and the skeet and trap team are exposed to outdoor sports through family members at an early age and come from “outdoors-friendly” states in the Midwest, Maine and Colorado. But there are others, like James Kim ’11, who is from Los Angeles and was exposed to skeet and trap by his father, a deputy sheriff who did rifle and shotgun competitions.

“It’s pretty rare for people, especially my age, in LA to have experience because it’s just not known at all,” Kim said. “When I tell people I do skeet and trap, they don’t know what it is, but when I explain the sport, they’re usually really interested.”

Migdalski said he has noted a change in outdoor sports over the past 40 years. While magazines used to show fishing enthusiasts with all their catches of their day, they usually feature only one fish now, which emphasizes conservation, he said. He added that not all shooting sport enthusiasts hunt game, as stereotypically believed, but many practice accuracy with clay targets at ranges and that those who are interested in fishing and hunting are more likely to respect nature.

He added that some students may feel there is no need for recreation that may be perceived as torturing fish, but said that the majority of students would probably “see the value” if they were exposed to outdoor sports at an early age and remained open-minded about it.

Director of Sports Publicity Steve Conn, who has worked both with Migdalski and his father at Yale, said both have made tremendous contributions to the University’s outdoor programs.

Said Conn: “Non-mainstream sports always have very interesting stories to tell, and Tom’s certainly one of the uncovered treasures that most people at Yale don’t know about.”