

Rod Rack

Conducted by Dick Finlay

Notes on Rod Selection

"The first and most important article in the angler's outfit is the rod; it takes precedence of every other tool or implement in his armamentarium. A thoroughly good and well-balanced rod is the angler's especial joy and pride. A true and tried rod of graceful proportions and known excellence, which has been the faithful companion on many a jaunt by mountain stream, brawling river, or quiet lake, and has taken its part, and shared the victory in many a struggle with the game beauties of the waters, at last comes to be looked upon as a tried and trusty friend, in which the angler reposes the utmost confidence and reliance, and which he regards with a love and affection that he bestows upon no other inanimate object." (from the Book of the Black Bass by James H. Henshall, M.D., published in 1881)

ATRULY BREATHLESS STATEMENT of praise if ever there was one! And the words "graceful proportions and known excellence" go hand in hand.

Whenever I approach a display rack of fly rods, I first look up to get an idea of the various lengths, then reach out and pick out the one I think I'd like to check over carefully. Taking the rod by the grip, I'll raise the tip up, then drop my hand down in a short, hammerlike stroke. This quick exercise flexes the rod. For an instant, the rod tip lags behind the rest of the rod, bending the rod in an upward curve. Then the tip flips down as the rod bends into a downward curve, and just as quickly, the rod springs back to a straight-out position, at rest, bending ever so slightly downward of its own weight. A few more strokes like this will give me a feel of the rod's responsiveness. Even many graphite fly rods, which tend to feel very light and stiff without the weight of a line to make them bend, can be tested this way. These quick "tip-flips" will tell a lot about a rod's characteristics. Is the butt stiff or flexible? Is the tip light or heavy? Does the rod tend to collapse in

the mid-section from too great a load? You can pretty well answer these questions, and if the rod feels good to you, then you'll want to look at it further.

The next thing I'll do is hold the rod up so I can squint down its length from my hand to the tip-top. A rod should be straight, of course, particularly a fine one; and all of the guides should line up with none cocked off to one side or the other. Then I'll consider the grip in my hand—fat, skinny, long, short, rough, smooth: Does it feel good between my thumb and forefinger? That, to me, is most important; it's where the thrust of every cast occurs, where you and the rod become "faithful companions."

And then it's time to take a good look at the overall appearance of the rod—the quality of its finish, the tone of the trimmings, the precision and style of the hardware.

A rod can look mighty handsome on the rack, which may be why you picked it up in the first place, but if it just doesn't have the right feel, there's no sense in checking it out further. The inherent ability of the rod to perform the way you want it to most certainly should be reflected in the quality of the workmanship—the balanced relationship of all the parts.

A high-gloss finish on the rod sections may have great eye appeal to some, yet others will prefer a softer, semi-gloss finish with a hand-rubbed look because it is less reflective. Finish at the wrappings should be smooth and without drips or runs. The wraps themselves must be neat; guide wraps in particular must be of one size or properly proportioned. Bright colors can be appealing if they are not garish, although on most fine rods the major portions of the wraps are done in colors that complement rather than contrast with the color of the blanks. The series of guides from stripping guide to tip-top needs to be properly proportioned and spaced. Stainless-steel snake guides, heavily chrome-plated, may seem

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flashy to some people, but their efficiency and durability justify their use.

Fly-rod grips turned from glued-together, specie-cork rings are still the standard for both function and appearance. There are some man-made, resilient materials being used as rod grips on some rods, but mostly on rods other than fly rods. They are generally too soft, and the sense of touch with the fly rod is diminished. The day will probably come, though, when one of these materials will replace a good share of the cork, and when it has the right feel and consistency, I'm sure it will look good too. Present-day cork grips require more filling of the grain than in the past, as the quality of the raw material is no longer what it was a few years ago. This filling and final sanding of the grips can be an added reflection of the rod-maker's skill, and you will sense it whenever you pick up the rod.

Metal parts for reel seats, winding checks and butt plates can come in a variety of colors and finishes. But I doubt if I'd want any fly rod with an aluminum reel seat anodized a bright cherry red or lime green with gold butt cap and locking nuts. Again, colors that complement rather than contrast with the rod sections themselves have more appeal. A touch of bright, silver-colored metal in rings and nuts is fine. More important is that the design of the metal parts must be such that none of them are too big or out of proportion—they can be strong and functional without looking heavy.

And finally, there is much to be said for the appearance of the rod sections themselves, whose very substance should be allowed to show through whatever final finish has been used. Take a rod out into the bright sunlight if you can, and look at the fibers of its material—bamboo, glass, graphite or whatever. You'll see the concentric spirals, the criss-cross weaves, the translucence of some blanks, the patterned stagger of nodes in straight-grained bamboo. There is an underlying beauty in a fine fly rod that is always there to be appreciated. 
