

BAMBOO RODS: FROM 'FAIRY WANDS' TO TARPON RODS

By Tom Tripi

I cast my first fly with a “bamboo” rod. That was in the early 1960s and it was the only “rod” I could afford – I even grew it myself! The crude flies I used were tied with yard hackle dropped from the hundreds of chickens and ducks we raised. Flies were attached to about 15 feet of Dacron tied to the end of that “bamboo rod.” It was quite the outfit, but it caught lots of bass and “white perch” along the banks of the Mississippi River.

Early on, I fished with various department store fly rods until I could afford a pair of Orvis Fulflex glass kit rods, 7- and 8-footers. I lived about a half-hour from Manchester, Vermont, at that time and visited the Orvis shop (and the American Museum of Fly Fishing) quite often. The reason for visiting both was to study their bamboo rods and the stunning bamboo collection in the museum. I loved them all, even the mass-produced Montagues. *I wanted one!* However, I remember saying to myself: “So many fly rods but so little money.”

Then, one day, I was visiting a dusty old hardware store in upstate New York and came across an umbrella stand tucked away in a corner containing three \$20 South Bend and Granger bamboo rods. They were mine in a heartbeat! That purchase started a bamboo-collecting passion that at one time totaled more than 60 rods, not to mention the hundred or so I traded or sold.

No, I couldn't afford to purchase 60 bamboo rods. You see, I restored two of those first rods, sold them for triple my cost and purchased six more “junkers” to restore. I usually kept one or two from each purchase until the day I swapped four rods, including an 1890 vintage Orvis and a Cross – Wes Jordan Double-Built. I was swapping with Gloria Jordan, Wes' wife, who sold Leonard rods in Manchester at the time. I received a new 8-foot Duracane in trade – butternut reel seat and all! What a deal!

I was then restoring 25 to 30 rods

a year, mostly commission work for collectors. And by the way, that Leonard was swapped in midstream on the Battenkill for a 6½-foot Orvis Rocky Mountain with Hardy reel. That trade was for my first “fairy wand!” Although it was on the heavy side (a 6-weight), it opened my eyes to the idea of fishing shorter bamboo rods for the gorgeous little brookies I chased in local streams.

Most of my bamboo rod collection then consisted of 6- and 7-footers. Some were shortened and reworked from longer rods (using the tip and mid-sections); all were ideal for small stream fly fishing. Their soft, forgiving actions were perfect for the short, controlled loops required to navigate narrow feeding lanes and canopied cover. I always tend to over-line my rods, hoping to tweak out more action. Of



Photo by Cheryl Dunwoth

This light 3-weight rod has a slender cork grip and forgiving action; it's a rod you can cast all day while recalling the nostalgia of the earlier years of fly fishing.

course, when dealing with a 20-foot cast and 3-weight lines, there was little chance of injuring the rods, especially when half of that line length was the lightweight leader and tippet.

All fly lines I used were double tapers. My leaders were hand tied, usually 10 to 11 feet long with extra long tippets. When learning to cast short bamboo rods, I slowed my casting stroke and arm movement – in some cases barely moving my arm, using a

quick flick of the wrist only (that was the start of my obsession of using little or no wasted body movement when casting). An advantage of using bamboo in my “formative” years was I didn't have to think about the slower action of bamboo rods or their heavier weight. You see, my casting arm wasn't used to the modern, ultralight, ultrafast graphite rods in use today. Many of my students who try my bamboo rods are amazed at how much more they weigh and how “slow” or relaxed their action is in comparison to their fast new graphite rods.

Almost all of my casting on small streams was side-armed, right- and left-handed. Side-arm casts were almost a necessity due to overhanging branches or low cover. Learning to cast right- and left-handed solved many problems of trying to cast into tight quarters on each side of the bank, but it took practice. I found it impractical to complete various casting techniques for small stream fishing while on a practice pond or lawn. The backcast was not hindered by obstructions. If you don't have a small stream on which to practice or the time to travel in order to both practice and fish, the perfect environment for you to practice short, controlled casting techniques is while taking a walk in an open wooded area.

Use a short rod with an old fly line and lay down casts between trees (while trying not to tangle the backcast). Yes, you definitely have to become a line watcher. And it does work. You quickly learn how to narrow and point loops on the backcast while learning the timing required to extend the line back far enough to load the rod. And that line-watching exercise prepares you for the timing necessary to cast the other end of the bamboo spectrum, those evil, 9-foot, 6-weight heavyweights!

Many of the earlier bamboo fly rods were mass produced by the tens of thousands. Some only cost a few dollars new back then, and most were 9-foot, three-piece rods using HDH,

Photo by Cheryl Dunworth



Photo by Tom Tripi

This heavy line-weight rod fully flexes all the way into the cork during the forward cast. Above, these rods were the big rocket launchers for the deadly little missiles used in the '50s and '60s for saltwater pursuits; they were the mainstays of the Joe Brooks, Ray Bergmans, and Lee Wulffs of the era.

HCH or GBG lines (6-, 7- or 8-weight double-tapers are today's equivalent). The rods were very heavy when compared to the scanty weight of today's graphite creations.

One of my early rod swaps involved three H&I and Montague rods. All were 9-footers for 8-weight lines. They probably weighed seven or more ounces and were quite stout. I restored and kept the Montague. It flexed in a relaxed manner into the cork and when it "uncoiled" after the backcast, the line just sailed away. It made me a distance caster overnight. I began to love distance casting! So I made an effort to purchase (or trade for) a few quality heavyweight bamboo rods. My earliest prizes were an Orvis "99" and a "Shooting Star." They are amazing casting machines, easily capable of handling today's modern lines, especially weight-forward lines with longer forward tapers.

If there is a difficulty casting a heavier bamboo rod, it would be that you almost have to be a weightlifter in order to use one during a full day of fly fishing. I'm not a weightlifter, but I do cut and hand-split three full cords of firewood each year (we heat our house with a woodstove). So I've developed a fairly strong arm. However, you have to remember, although heavy, these big rods are not

ones that you have to overpower in order to cast. The better ones almost cast "by themselves"; you just load the rod during the backcast, hold on and enjoy the thrill.

The best way to learn to control the action of a heavy bamboo rod (or any bamboo rod, for that matter) is by simply practicing the false cast. Pick out a favorite bamboo rod, attach a reel with enough weight to balance the weight of the rod so that it and reel are creating a sense of balance in your hand, and you're ready to go. Strip out about 30 feet of line and begin false casting about half of the line. Note that the rod flexes almost to the cork and it reacts slower than a graphite rod. Extend the fly line out to 40 feet by using a slow, relaxed, false cast motion. The object here is to load the rod on every false cast.

Establish a rhythm while using more or less power to the forward cast until you're comfortable. When you've figured out a tempo that feels good, begin to extend the line a few feet on each false cast. As the line extends, you'll notice the rod really starts to flex "down to the cork." Start laying down a few casts on the grass or water by allowing your forward cast to sail out using the rod's power only (no hauling is required). Just control the line, and let it shoot through the guides.

Distance is no problem. A well-designed 7-weight bamboo rod is quite capable of a 100-foot or more cast. And remember, you're probably casting a dry line with a yarn fly on grass. Think about the added weight of water on 50 feet of thick fly line, not to mention the weight of a big saltwater fly. That's when the rod really loads up!

I've pursued just about any fish (or reptile) that swims in my area with a bamboo rod. Although alligators are fun with heavier bamboo rods, my favorite species right now would be spotted gar. A few acquaintances I encountered in Florida say they love using bamboo for tarpon, bonefish and snook. I reserve my big bamboo rods for large redfish and specks and do a number of casting demonstrations with them, as students seem to be able to easily observe the process through their slower casting stroke. Because of their relaxed action, they also are particularly good for demonstrating the individual parts of a roll cast. And students also enjoy seeing and using some of the rods that were mainstays in the "Golden (and formative) Years of Fly Fishing!" 🍷

Master Casting Instructor Tom Tripi is from Folsom, Louisiana, where he uses a fly rod and canoe to pursue his favorite fish, teaches casting to students of all ages, and studies astronomy in his spare time.