

# Short Rods Extended

*You can make  
long casts and  
land big fish  
with short rods.*

LEE WULFF

**A**FTER READING TED LEESON'S FINE article on using short, light rods for small streams, I feel the need to tell how well such rods can work for long casts and big fish, if you adapt your casting to bring out the short rod's maximum capabilities.

Back in the 1930s when Atlantic salmon were all being caught on expensive "salmon" outfits, rods averaging 15 feet in length, I couldn't afford a salmon outfit, so I fished for and caught salmon on my 9-foot trout outfit. And I wrote about it. The salmon fraternity, which had had the salmon fishing all to itself, called my light rods ridiculous and claimed they wouldn't work. So step by step, I dropped to 8-, 7-, and then 6-foot rods; I caught fish on each of them and wrote about it. To cap the climax, in 1941 I eliminated the rod entirely and cast the line by hand to hook a ten-pound salmon, bring it in, and hand tail it.

There were obstacles along the way, and I had solved them. The first was that little rods were made for little casts to little fish in little streams. I had to change that. I can liken my problem to that of the French who, when everyone believed you had to have a halberd or broadsword and cut an enemy's head off to kill him, proved that all you had to do was have a light, small rapier and pike a tiny hole in your enemy's heart.

As a graduate civil engineer

(Stanford 1926), I knew that the rule of kinetic energy, the energy of motion, was that the force was one-half the mass (the line) times the square of the velocity. All our casters were using relatively short strokes and power, increasing the mass of the line (with a rod to match it), and adding the power needed to increase distance. By doubling the mass of the line with the same short stroke, they could double the energy and cast farther. By doubling the speed I cast using the same line, I could *quadruple the energy* and get the longer distances required for salmon fishing.

I got my friend West Jordan of Orvis to make me a 6-foot split-bamboo rod that weighed only 15/8 ounces. It was very light in action and had only one thing different from other ultralight rods of that day. It had some stiffness just above its small grip, so that no matter how hard I drove it forward on a cast, it would not lose its resiliency—it still had life to drive a line forward. I didn't know at that time that a baseball pitcher could make his hand move through the air at almost 100 miles an

hour. (A ball won't go any faster than the hand that throws it.)

My hand casting told me that if I could cast 50 feet of C (7-weight) line by hand, the added impetus that even a very light rod could give it would give me great distance. I ran a test with a 9-foot outfit and a 6-foot outfit. The average speed with the 6-footer was over a hundred miles an hour; for the 9-footer, it was far less. Air resistance slowed the 9-footer. As a pilot, I knew that if I added a couple of inches to the length of my propeller with the same power setting, I would reduce the rotations per minute by a couple of hundred. The small rod's speed gave me the distance I wanted. Still, there was a problem.

Gravity was always at work, and since the line cast with a 6-footer traveled lower and closer to the water, there was a tendency for it to hit the surface on a long backcast. I solved this problem by breaking with traditional casting techniques that made

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the fly travel in a figure-eight course, crossing just over the angler's head. I made my fly travel an oval course, never crossing its own path. I brought my fly in to pass beside me as low to the water as possible and made an upward swing on the backcast, which meant that instead of dropping, the line was rising as it unrolled. That gave me an unconventionally long backward stroke that set me up for a full forward stroke of maximum length.

One well-known angling writer wrote that "fly casting is not like throwing a ball," but that's exactly the motion I use. It is the way man has learned to move his hand the fastest. With a full arm throw, I could cast as far or farther with my light rods than with my longer, heavier ones.

By using short, light rods, catching big fish with them, and writing about it, I brought the trout fishermen to the salmon streams and took away the long-rod monopoly for its limited number. Over time that type of rod has practically been eliminated on our side of the Atlantic. Using this method, I've caught salmon of over 30 pounds, steelhead, big pike, and even a 15-pound permit.

"Why did you stop at six feet?" someone questioned at a lecture. I thought a moment and replied, "Because at that length I do not feel handicapped in any way against a fisherman with a longer rod." When "Jock Scott," a premier British salmon writer in the 1940s and 1950s, wrote in the *Atlantic Salmon Journal* that my little rods were just toys and unfit for salmon fishing, I challenged him, and we fished for a week on the Scottish Dee River. He used a 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-foot greenheart Grant Vibration rod, and I used my 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-ounce West Jordan split-bamboo rod. I covered the water as well as he did and caught a good salmon (surprisingly, on a dry fly). He caught none. So ultralight, short rods are suitable for big waters and big fish, once you change to the "oval" casting style and adapt your casting to the short rod's capabilities.

Leeson mentions the Scott PowR-Ply 6-foot 10-inch rod as a good one. Harry Wilson of Scott Rods made that rod specially for me with the design I requested a dozen years ago. Then, as with the West Jordan rod which Orvis put into their line, Harry put it into his line. He made it for a 6-weight line. I use a 6/7 Triangle Taper or a 7-weight Shakespeare Mono Line on it. I've used one of these rods for a dozen years and used it hard with no damage. Like a

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rapier, it will take the punishment required. In my casting demonstrations at our school, in spite of the fact that I was eighty-six years old on February 10 and am moderately arthritic, I straightened out a full 90-foot fly line and ten feet of leader on my casts with that short rod and my lighter 6-foot Fenwick.

Now for some specifics. By using a heavier line than most people use on their light rods, I have more weight out in a relatively short line on a small stream and can draw more bend and power from the rod for better control and accuracy. With the Triangle Taper, the forward section of my line is as delicate as if I use a 3- or 4-weight.

Because my long stroke starts smoothly, there is no sudden overload on the rod, which might be created if I tried to put all that power in the normal short stroke used with longer rods (just from the shoulder forward). It's worth noting that because of my line's extra speed I'm able to cast into a strong wind better than I could with a heavier line at a slower speed.

I may be eighty-six years old, but I can still cast all day with the little rods like my favorite, the Scott, and never get tired. Heavier rods which I use, for instance when I fish with others from a boat and want to keep my line high and well over their heads for safety,



*Lee Wulff on Quebec's Ste. Marguerite River.*

feel like clubs now and don't give me the advantage of casting farther.

The disadvantages of small rods are many. I don't recommend them as an easier way to catch fish. But they are a challenge and a pleasure to fish with. They won't give you as much control over a fish you're playing. And it's not

as easy to use heavy flies, but if your timing is perfect, you can do it. I have made 70-foot casts all day long on a Norwegian salmon river with 6/0 and 7/0 flies without hangups or tangles. You do not have the lifting leverage when you play a big fish on a short rod, but that can be made up for by using a greater movement of the whole arm instead of a steadier arm and the short bends normally used.

One great advantage of the short rod is that you can play your fish right into a hand grip or short net range. With long rods, the fish is beyond arm's length and requires a long-handled net or an ally to land it easily. To bring a fish in close with a long rod requires a high rod with a very tight, dangerous bend, which defeats good control of the fish. There's a whole world of pleasure out there for those who want to take their little rapiers out to do big jobs.



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