

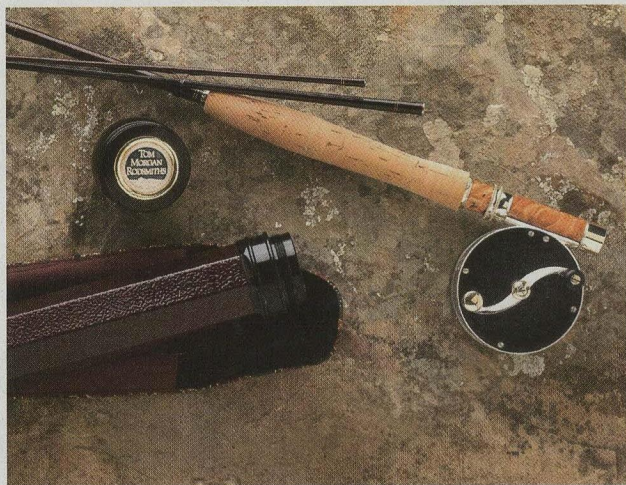
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A Life in Rod-Making

Tom Morgan earns the Bellinger Award

By Seth Norman



"THERE ARE HIGH ACHIEVERS within the rodmaking community today that deserve to be recognized for their hard work," says Chet Croco, owner of Bellinger rod-building products, "and to receive the high praise and esteem of their colleagues while they are among us. All too often the award is deserved but the recognition comes too late. So I made up an award called the A.P. Bellinger award...and when (Al Bellinger) came by to visit one day I brought the guys over and announced to Al that they were being presented with the first ever A.P. Bellinger Award...for demonstrating through the rod-maker's craft that quality and integrity never go out of style."

That was four years ago: a gracious gesture, of the kind that might easily have ended at that moment. But no. The next year Croco decided to let some of his customers decide. "Without hesitation Daryll Whitehead was chosen," Croco says. Among other virtues, Whitehead, a master bamboo rod-builder, was honored for "His extensive taper library, agate stripping

Rod Fair, in Camp Sherman, Oregon. About Thramer, Croco asserts: "(He is)... arguably the most prolific bamboo rod-maker of all time...a living resource of information for rod-makers (who) never takes himself too seriously....His fight to protect his own tapers bearing his name from being copied and sold will someday take on a much greater historical significance."

This is year four. And here we are with a far larger ad-hoc Bellinger committee, fielding nominations arriving, via Internet, from all over the United States, also Europe and Japan. "We wanted to open this up to anybody, to peers who could tell us who they thought was worthy," Croco continues.

The result and "overwhelming favorite" for the 2008 A.P. Bellinger award, according to Croco, was...Tom Morgan.

Tom Morgan bought R. L. Winston Rod Company in 1973, along with silent partner Sid Eliason; and, later with Glenn Brackett, Morgan co-owned the company until 1991. His goal from the outset was

guides, snake guides, his work with Jack Howell, his beautiful finish work, his highly embellished rods...."

A year later, after even more consultations with customers, the Bellingers and a growing cadre of cane-rod makers, A.J. Thramer was tapped, and given his award at the Metolius Bamboo

The work of Tom Morgan, in graphite (left) and split-cane (above).



to make "perfect" rods—even though Morgan himself acknowledges, with a distinctly rueful laugh, "There's no such thing as perfect, if you get a big enough magnifying glass."

Even so, many in the know insist that, with the Stalker series, Morgan and Winston reached a pinnacle in fiberglass-rod manufacture.

A lively history of fiberglass at Winston may be found at fiberglassflyrodders.com, wherein Morgan reports refinements in shaft-wrapping technology, the evolution of ferrules, reel seats and more. Much more: embedded everywhere in this story are people, an all-star roster of fellow innovators, collaborators and contractors, consultants and employees. Gary Howells, Jim and Joe Fisher, Doug Merrick, Russ Peak, Jerry Humpal, Mel Kreiger (who helped improve Morgan's own cast, and for whose passing we are lamenting now), Lew Stoner, Red Loskot, Chris Warner, Al Wilson—Glenn Brackett, of course—and....

You get the picture. Of *history*, I mean—a landscape, rich with detail, and *peopled*. But wait. Fiberglass?

Croco et al are devotees of split-cane rods; Croco's even making a new line of these. So, selecting Morgan for the Bellinger/bamboo award fits...how?

"I love fishing bamboo," says Morgan. "And fiberglass, also graphite—all the materials have their own place. A great fishing rod is always a great fishing rod."

By that, he means each should meet three criteria: "A rod should have the appropriate bend, or flex, for the distance it's going to be fished. It must have good

balance between the tip and the butt—not a tip too soft, butt too stiff. And it must be smooth, silky smooth to cast. No kicks, no hinging.”

That’s wisdom earned through long, long experience, applicable to almost anything with guides. But there is something special Morgan did specifically for cane-rod building. And it’s one of those changes that means something, and will stand.

In essence, The Morgan Hand Mill, introduced in 1998, allows a split-cane rod-builder to mill the kind of superb, exquisitely tapered and fitted shafts—apparently “seamless”—that masters get by careful, time-consuming planing. It makes four-, five-, six- and eight-sided shafts, “perfectly,” reliably, in a fraction the time, while giving a builder new and important kinds of control. Those who use it express profound admiration, and gratitude. This includes my friend Sid Strong. Sid bought the first model Morgan marketed: “It’s fantastic. I’ve been making rods ever since. I mean, blanks so tight you can’t tell. Just an incredible tool.”

For a history of the Morgan Hand Mill, see <http://www.troutrods.com/handmill.html>. Much of the text works best for those with a technical background, but there’s one aspect that should leap out at anybody: how many people Morgan identifies as contributors to his mill’s evolution. Among these you will find engineers and craftsmen, as one might expect, but also—and, *repeatedly*—his customers, whose contributions lead Morgan to adaptations and improvements. Even

when he does not incorporate the changes, Morgan acknowledges those who made suggestions. Hold there for an instant.

That kind of recognition, that expression of appreciation, looks to be an important part of what the Bellinger Award will mean for this tribe. A quality that Croco and co-nominators wanted to emphasize—and that Tom Morgan clearly thinks is special.

“From the time I bought Winston, I never felt there should be secrets. Winston was an open shop; we were honest and forthright. We answered any question, told people whatever we knew.” He laughs. “I still do. And that’s what makes this recognition so meaningful, coming from people who are part of it all....”

Return to my friend Sid. “He called me up, I should tell you. Tom Morgan.”

“Tom Morgan?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve talked to him. He called me up, and actually asked me to return a part, because he’d improved it and wanted me have the better version.”

“He called you.”

“I know, I know. Who does that kind of thing any more? What company offers that kind of service?”

It’s very nearly a rhetorical question.

I relay Sid’s story to Tom Morgan. “You know, we do try,” he says with another soft laugh. With the Bellinger Award as measure, a modest “we” succeeds.

Tom Morgan is still producing fine cane and graphite rods, and will introduce a new fiberglass series. See www.troutrods.com.