

# VIRGINIA SPORTSMAN

Virginia and Beyond

*A State of Mind ♦ A Way of Life*

June/July 2012

\$4.95

Virginia Beach

Spanish Double Guns

Building a  
Bamboo Rod

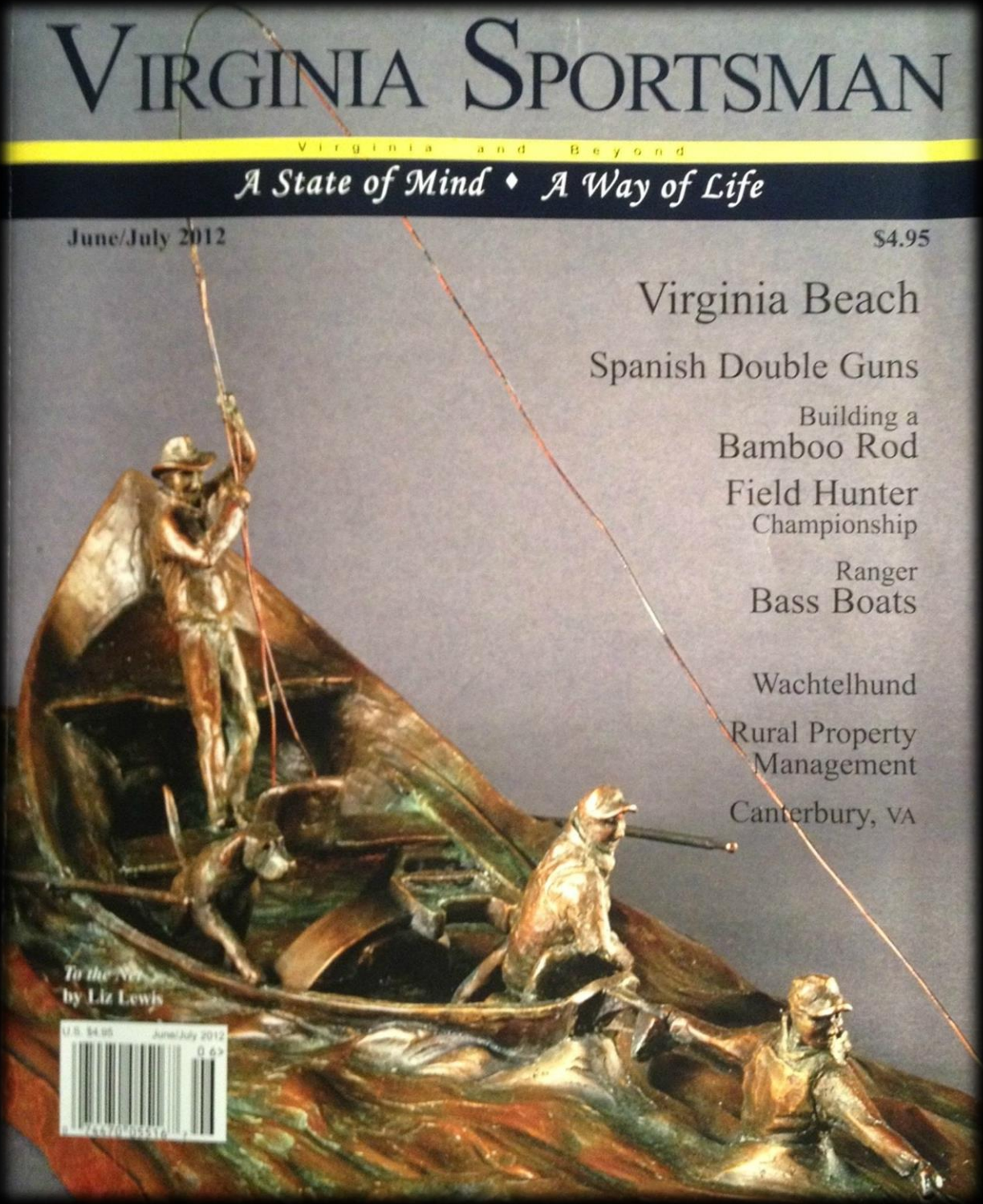
Field Hunter  
Championship

Ranger  
Bass Boats

Wachtelhund

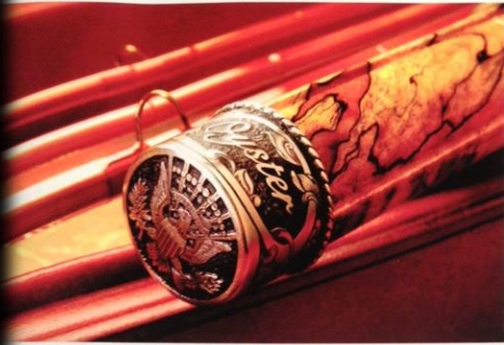
Rural Property  
Management

Canterbury, VA



*To the Net*  
by Liz Lewis





## Building an Heirloom Bamboo Fly Rod

Story by Kenneth L. Walker  
Photos courtesy of Oyster Bamboo



Tanjin bamboo

19 Virginia Sportsman • June/July 2012

Nestled in the northwest corner of Georgia is a quaint town called Blue Ridge, a former railroad village. I traveled there in late October for the sole purpose of spending a week in a classroom to learn how to build a bamboo fly rod. My teacher was Bill Oyster, considered one of the best bamboo rod-makers in the country.

Arriving on a Sunday morning, I entered the shop and looked around at the tools of real craftsmen: hand planes, calipers, knives and the like. As soon as Oyster greeted me, I knew I would be in good hands in the shop and would be in for some genuine Southern hospitality. I also met his wife Shannen, who is in charge of the operations. Oyster admits that he simply plays with his hobby of building rods while Shannen runs the shop, serves as the accountant and schedules all the events they participate in during the year. Finally, I was reassured when Oyster said that no one had ever left at week's end without a completed rod.

Four other gents joined us to fill out the class. We came with varying degrees of woodworking experience, but we were determined to build our own one-of-a-kind bamboo rods to use on our local streams back home. After introductions, Oyster asked each of us about our experiences, our casting weaknesses, and what we wanted in the ideal personal rod. By talking to us individually, Oyster could help us determine what weight would be best, as there are countless options in rod construction. For me, a five weight might be a five weight, but for another, an entirely different set of specifications for weight and length might be in order.



Bill Oyster (center) instructing

An example of Oyster's engravings



A special commission for former President Jimmy Carter



On the stream with the completed heirloom

Bamboo fly rods are the grand dames of fly fishing. Today's great fly rods are not a piece of bamboo that came from a rolled-up rug with a metal ferrule attached. Today's great fly rods come from bamboo that originates in the area of China, where the best, most flexible bamboo in the world grows. Prices for bamboo rods can range from a few hundred to thousands of dollars. Oyster's rods fall into the latter category—they are truly works of art. Oyster is sought after around the world, drawing attention at trade shows, and among true fly-fishing aficionados, including former President Jimmy Carter. I saw Oyster that he should describe his "bespoke bamboo rods" as the "bespoke workmanship is similar to that of a handmade English shotgun. Instead of dogs and game bird scenes engraved on a gun, Oyster has fish, fly lines, and in his engravings on the reel set.

It took six long days of work to complete my rod. We began by taking a blowtorch to the bamboo culms—a process called "charring." This provided the color tone for the shafts. We then used a metal rasp to smooth down the imperfections of the bamboo. Using a knife and hammer, we began the splitting process to end up with a stack of 12 strips of bamboo approximately 1/4 inch in diameter. Several days of straightening and bevel-planing the rough taper was followed by the assembly process—gluing together two sections of bamboo for each shaft, in order to provide the hex shape of the taper on the butt and tip sections. Imagine taking a plane and shaving off 2/1000 of an inch of wood at a time! Then imagine the stress and present worry about that one misaligned slip of the hand.

Next were hours of sanding, and more sanding. Then we assembled pieces of cork on the butt of the bottom shaft and shaped the cork into a lathe. The most difficult part of