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MAIN ATTRACTION: BAMBOO FISHING RODS

This week's featured topic



Continuing an old craft, Gainesville's Bill Oyster makes bamboo fly rods

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The man worked the fly rod on an unnamed brown trout stream in the Bighorn Mountains of north-central Wyoming. But the 7-year-old boy couldn't figure out what he was doing or why he was doing it.

The man, a friend of the boy's family and later a fishing guide, used the rod like an artist's brush, rhythmically sending out line in perfect candy-cane loops, painting the stream with his casts.

Beautiful, yes, but young Bill Oyster was perplexed.

"I couldn't figure out what this guy with the long rod, who wasn't catching any fish, was doing," Oyster said, recalling that fishing trip from when his family lived in Wyoming. "I was fishing with a Leeco and a can of worms. I couldn't understand why he wasn't using one of my worms."

Oyster, now 29 and living in Gainesville, eventually figured it out, although his journey back to the art of fly fishing has been a ride perhaps as wild as any Rocky Mountain stream. A free spirit his whole life, he has flown planes, raced bicycles, lived in six different states, attended three major colleges and changed his major with regularity.

Somehow, all of that helped forge what he is today — a budding master bamboo fly-rod builder.

Huh?
"Bamboo is the pinnacle of the fly-fishing art," said Oyster, letting the artist in him speak before giving way to the philosopher. "It's a tangible symbol of the whole philosophy of fly fishing... The equipment is part of the experience."

His passion for the sport is clear. The romance of fly fishing always has owned part of his heart, and the creativity needed to construct a perfect bamboo rod appeals to his artistic soul.

Still, Oyster never would have found his present nirvana without the long, strange trip he took to get here.

Flying since the age of 15, he attended Georgia Tech and majored in aerospace studies with every

MORE ON BAMBOO FISHING RODS

■ The first commercial fishing rods were made of bamboo, which lent itself well to casting and fighting fish. But availability and, ultimately, price, were concerns. Today, some fly-fishing purists insist on using bamboo rods, new models of which can cost in excess of \$1,000.

■ Bamboo is heavier than such materials as fiberglass and graphite. That's why trout bamboo fly rods are more common than heavier rods. "I can make a 13-weight if someone wants to try to cast it," said rod-maker Bill Oyster, who typically doesn't make a rod heavier than a 7-weight.

■ Info: Call Oyster Flyrods at 770-403-8191 or send an e-mail message (oystereb@mindspring.com).



military career and enrolled in the University of Florida, "because I wanted to go someplace warm and sunny." It also is where he began racing bicycles. Physical fitness was required in ROTC, so he frequently worked out on a bicycle. His fellow ROTC students encouraged him to start racing.

After he declined further ROTC scholarship money, he transferred to the University of Georgia, where he continued cycling, changed his major from English to art and met his wife Shannen, who worked at the alternative-music magazine located next to the bike shop where he worked. The cycling thing took off. He won the SEC cycling title, raced as a professional for two years and competed in the 1996 Olympic trials road race; only 200 are invited, and Oyster finished in the top fifth.

"Cycling is physically and mentally demanding," said Oyster,

His art background and fly-fishing passion collided when he began making the fly rods more than two years ago. A self-described "realism artist," he best enjoys trying to duplicate something in life. And the fact that his art is made to be used appeals to him that much more. "If Picasso made fly rods, don't think people could fish without them," Oyster said, referring to the Spanish painter and sculptor. "My rods are made for fishing. Functional art is what I'm trying to create here."

He also has created a smooth-casting rod, which has the advantage of the bamboo's natural fibers to allow the angler to make more delicate presentations than the faster-casting and lighter-weight graphite.

"Bamboo is for casting," he says. "Graphite is for shooting line."

The Tonkin bamboo he uses is found on place in the world, a 30-square-mile hillside in southern China. A 12-foot culm, or stalk, of bamboo generally will make two rods.

Working out of his basement, Oyster splits the cane length-wise then cutstrips painstakingly plane down to 60-degree triangle strips that are tapered at the tip to less than the width of a toothpick. Six pieces are glued together to make the rod blank. All the bamboo is flame-tempered several times to drive out moisture and to strengthen the material. The rods are dipped slowly into varnish three times. The handle is made of Portuguese cork, the reel seat is walnut wood.

It takes about 100 hours to produce one rod, which when you consider that he charges \$750 to \$950 for one with an extra tip, barely pays him minimum wage for his efforts. Even at his best, he figures he can't make more than a few rods a year.

"The average age [of people making bamboo rods] is about 60 years old," he says. "The way I look at it, I'm just getting a 30-year head start. I there's one thing I learned from being, it's you can't beat a good head start."

Oyster hopes to build his reputation of crafting quality rods; his price probably will increase with demand. Whatever happens, he will be content helping anglers find the heart and soul of fly fishing, not just fillings stringer.

"If it was only about catching fish," he says, "I'd still be using the