



In The Beginning – Part III

Rod Building—Is It Worth It?

By Slapout Mike

You've been fly fishing for a year now. Your casting skill is satisfactory and you are catching fish consistently on flies. It is time for that new, second or maybe third rod. You want to go a bit upscale, move up to a faster 7 weight, and overcome some the deficiencies with your current rods. You really want that \$680 Sage Z-Axis you handled in the local fly shop. But the price is prohibitive and the thought enters your mind—*could I build my own rod, save some money and get the same or maybe even better results?*

Anyone can build their own fly rod if they want to!

Building a fly rod (or any fishing rod) for that matter is a relatively simple assembly and finishing process requiring a few, but not necessarily complex tools. Having built my own rods, first from fiberglass blanks and then from graphite for the last 45 years, I was really interested to see the process on a commercial basis last year during a visit to the R. L. Winston factory in Twin Bridges, Montana. Surprisingly, it is exactly the same process I use in my home workshop, albeit R. L. Winston has instituted a lot more efficiencies and quality control steps, they still assemble fly rod parts into a finished rod using the same basic process I use. Graphite rod blank manufacture is a sophisticated and complex industrial process, so building your own fly rod starts with the purchase of the fly rod blank. Once the blank is selected, additional components are required—guides, grip and reel seat. Three additional materials are required—thread to secure the guides, glue to secure the grip and reel seat and some type of rod finish, most often some type of specialized epoxy.



R. L. Winston Rod Company,
Twin Bridges, MT

What's the process?



Typical Components - Reel Seat, Blank,
Grip, Guides and Thread

With components in hand, step one is the assembly of the grip and reel seat on to the butt of the blank. This is generally accomplished with a pre-formed cork grip and matching reel seat. The grip is reamed to fit snugly on the blank while the reel seat is generally shimmed to fit snugly. Slather on a good quality, slow setting epoxy, position the grip and seat accurately and let it set up. Step two: mark the location of guides along the length of the blank. There are a variety of formulas for this, but most blank manufacturers provide recommended guide spacing for each blank. Starting with the first (largest guide), temporarily secure it to the blank in the proper position with tape or surgical tubing. Depending on blank diameter and guide foot size, some guide feet need to be ground down or fine tuned to match the rod blank. This is easily accomplished with a Dremel Tool or other grinding device. Once the guide is positioned, each guide foot is secured with thread wraps. Although thread wraps may seem difficult, they really aren't. The assistance of some rod wrapping jig is useful, but not necessary. The rod wrappers that work for the R. L.





Winston do all their thread work free-hand, without any jig or other device to assist them. After all the guides are wrapped, the tip is placed over the tip of the blank and secured with 5 minute epoxy. The final step is finishing the rod by protecting the wraps with an epoxy finish purposely formulated for fishing rods. The finish is brushed on each wrap and is self-leveling as the rod is rotated slowly for at least two hours as the finish sets up. You can do this by hand, but some form of slow rotating (3-5 rpm) jig is very useful for this task. Within 48 hours after you apply the finish, the rod is ready to fish. That's the basic process. There are other subtleties and difficulties, especially as it relates to thread work. However, an average home rod builder can build a new rod with about 8 hours of labor spread over 3-4 days.



Guide Wrapping Jig

What does it cost?

Cost is the single most relevant reason to build your own rods. Not factoring in your labor or equipment costs (which are really minimal) you can evaluate the general cost savings by comparing component costs to the price of a finished rod. This example is illustrative:

- Finished Rod: *G.L. Loomis, Streamdance GLX, 9', 6 weight fast action fly rod: \$630 MSRP*
- Blank and Components:
 - Blank: G. L Loomis, GLX 9' 6 weight fast action blank: \$322 MSRP \$194 Wholesale
 - Guides: Pacific Bay Guides (9ea) \$10-20 MSRP
 - Grip: Half Wells Cork Grip: \$20 MSRP
 - Reel Seat: \$15-50 MSRP

In general components are going to cost you approximately 60% of the finished rod price. If you have a way to obtain components at wholesale prices, you can drop the component price to about 40% of the finished rod price.

Are there other reasons why I should build my own rods?

Apart from cost, the home rod builder has great latitude to customize the rods he builds. This usually involves quality upgrades of components and



Fancy Thread Work

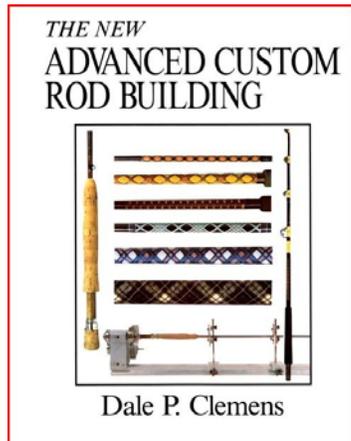
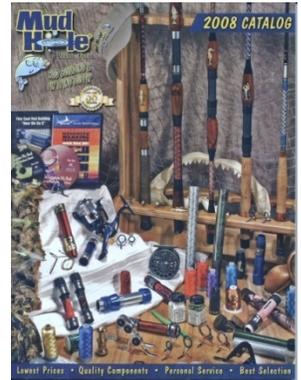




interesting or artful thread work. Although quality upgrades in components drives costs up, the end-result is a higher quality, better performing rod. With low to mid-range commercial rods, the guides used are generally not the highest quality, highest performing guides available. Upgrading guides is usually my first choice when building a new rod. There is also some variety in grips not generally available in commercial rods. There is a wide range of quality and designs available in reel seats. Reel seats are also very customizable.

Where do I start?

Don't buy a kit! Get familiar with rod blanks available from manufacturers and blanks and components available from various rod component suppliers. Learn from the onset what components you need and where you can improve quality and customize. Mudhole (<http://shop.mudhole.com/>) and Custom Tackle Supply (<http://customtackle.com/>) are two



One of Modern Classics on Rod Building

suppliers that come to mind. There are others as well. Most of these suppliers have online tutorials to help you choose components and construct your rod. Choose a relatively inexpensive blank for your first rod and don't go overboard on components. Keeping your thread work simple is important for your first rod to eliminate opportunities for mistakes. Finishing a rod is something you just have to learn to do well. More than likely your thread work will need improvement and your finishing won't be perfect. In other words, you'll find a lot of flaws (hopefully superficial) in your first rod. Those flaws however won't have much effect on the fish. However you will learn a lot and identify

those skills you need to improve on and maybe some additional tools you want acquire to improve your finished product. There are a number of books on the subject of building rods but two stand out as excellent manuals on the process. My favorite is Dale Clemen's *Advanced Custom Rod Building* (1978) which is readily available in the second-hand market. Although this might seem a bit dated, nothing much has changed technique wise since it was published. The other is *The Custom Graphite Fly Rod* by Skip Morris (1989). Although I learned the craft long before instructional videos hit the market, there many videos available on the subject of custom rod building. Regardless, there is ample online, published or video instruction available to the home rod builder.

Rod Building Is Worth It

If you are so inclined and feel you can take the time to learn the skills required to build a quality fly rod, it is definitely worth the effort. Having done it for many years, there is a real sense of accomplishment when you enjoy casting your own custom fly rod, enjoy showing it off to friends and acquaintances and you catch fish on your own custom fly rod. And all the while, you have saved yourself a bundle of money.

