

The level of detail rod builder Bill Amerongen puts into a rod is impressive as is the finished product.

Custom Rod Artistry

ROD BUILDER BILL AMERONGEN COMBINES THREAD ARTISTRY WITH PERFORMANCE AT HIGHLINER CUSTOM RODS.

STORY BY PAT HOGLUND, PHOTOS BY CAMERON WOODS

FOR YEARS BASEBALL WAS AN integral part of Bill Amerongen's life. Like many fathers he coached his son Ryan throughout his youth baseball career, watched him play high school baseball, spent countless hours in the summer watching him play club baseball and traveled with him through the Junior Olympic baseball circuit. After Ryan graduated from Bend High School he played baseball at St. Mary's College outside of San Francisco. That left Bill with a lot of time on his hands. Besides fishing, he needed something to do. At the urging of his wife, Bill started building custom fishing rods, something he'd done casually since he was 14 years old.

"When Ryan graduated from high school and went down to St. Mary's, all of our baseball stuff ended. That was unequivocally the highlight of my life, but there was just a vacuum when he left. So my wife said I need to get back into it."

What started out as a hobby turned into a full-fledged obsession. In 2008 he started his own business, Highliner Custom Rods. Today, Amerongen describes the number of rods he builds each year as small. His focus is on quality which involves lots of time, versus quantity. This makes sense once you witness the level of detail he puts into each rod.

Recently I spent an afternoon at his shop in Bend, Oregon. Fish mounts hang from the walls, mostly trophy brown trout from various lakes in Central Oregon. He has photos of





The variety of thread colors is endless giving way to the whims and creativity to person ordering a custom rod.



Whether it's a set of carbon fiber handles (below) or the types of guides and wrapping, a Highliner Custom Rod is a result of 60-plus hours of work.



memorable catches, and the occasional fishing poster help take up any available wall space. He has two waist high work tables, each with a wrapping table that can hold several rods at a time. Beneath each table there are neatly stacked storage boxes containing everything a rod builder needs, including reel seat material, cork rounds, rod guides, tip tops, epoxy and a dozen boxes that contain nothing but thread. There are over 100 different colors of thread, and they are arguably the nuggets that help separate his rods from other custom rod builders. Not so much the amount of thread or the different colors, but what he does with each spool. It is the precision threadwork that Amerongen puts into each rod that has earned him the reputation as one of the best custom rod builders in the world.

"People come to me because they want something special and one of a kind," he says.

Amerongen builds rods for anglers



throughout the U.S., and across the world. He has one customer in the United Kingdom that has purchased 26 different rods from him. A few years ago he built a rod for a member of the U.S. military stationed at the US Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. And most recently he built a rod for someone in Viet Nam.

"I built him a rod to fish giant stingrays in the Meykong Delta out of dugout canoes. They're in 20 feet of water and they're the size of a queen size bed mattress and all you're trying to do is break their suction

off the bottom of the river. Why you would want to do that I have no idea, but he wanted a rod for that."

Anglers find Amerongen through internet searches, or word of mouth. Once they find his website potential customers are able to view the intricacy of his work. The thread design is sophisticated, exact and imaginative. When he decided to get serious about rod building, it was the decorative thread work that captivated his attention. In fact, he recalls looking at the cover of RodMaker magazine which featured fishing rods from Steve Paterson. It was Paterson's rods that motivated him.

"As I developed and grew my skills over the years, I sought out the advice and guidance of other rod builders that I admired. The absolute game changer for me was the day I met Steve Paterson," says Amerongen, who calls Paterson one of the best rod builders and thread artists in the world. "He became my mentor, friend and absolutely changed my life

as a rod builder. Steve set the bar as a craftsman and innovator and taught me to always look for ways to experiment and improve my work. His influence continues to have a significant impact on the rods I build.”

When you look at the threadwork that Amerongen uses on his rods, it’s hard not to appreciate the time he puts into each rod. Daunting, complex and time consuming, the diamond pattern he uses above each grip is precision-like. The wraps around each guide is articulate and beautiful. Amerongen’s thread work is its own work of art.

Whether it’s a Spey rod, a tuna rod, or a salmon or steelhead rod, each time he builds a rod for a customer he spends an inordinate amount of time on the phone interviewing the person. He wants to know what style of fishing the person will be doing, what tackle they’ll be using, what reels and even the type of fishing line they’re planning to use. He even goes as far as having them measure their hand to custom-fit the handles.

“I want as much detail as possible so I can be able to be exact in rod blank selection since it is the basis of their custom rod,” he explains. “Being close is not an option here. The expectations I have of myself in my business do not allow for being close. It has to be perfect.”

To get it perfect he will send customers thread samples, reel seat material, and handle materials. It’s a lengthy process that is rare in the custom rod building world.

Amerongen builds his own grips, which varies from cork, burl cork or carbon fiber. He uses choice woods for his reel seats, and he uses only the best components. He then uses a rod blank based on his customer’s parameters. Eventually the conversation leads to the colors of thread the customer wants. And that’s when the work begins. Once the color scheme and pattern is decided Amerongen will put in as many as 80 hours of work on a rod, most of which involves the thread work on the guides and above the handle.



Bill Amerongen inspects a rod he’s building for a customer.

“As a lifetime hardcore angler, factory rods all looked the same to me. I realized that if I walked into any fly shop in North America, the rods for sale were all very similar. I personally did not want to fish with boring looking rods anymore so I went to work combining compelling colors in intri-

cate designs. It is always fun to talk with my clients and learn what drives their choice of colors. Sometimes it is a matching set of rods, or a favorite color, or the colors of their school or even their favorite sports teams.”

When I interviewed him, Amerongen was in the process of building

Bill Amerongen designs and builds fishing rods using as many as 16 guides in what he calls Guide Train Compression.

One of two mooching rods that are wrapped in Seattle Seahawk colors.



two mooching rods for a salmon fisherman in Washington. The thread wraps were in the Seattle Seahawks' color scheme. Once completed he says no rod leaves his shop for less than \$850. In fact the two Seahawk mooching rods sold for \$1,000 apiece.

"And I'm feeling like an absolute fool for only charging someone \$1,000. There's a lot of work that goes into it, but I love it. Obviously I'm not doing it for the money."

After several years of developing his own style of threadwork, Amerongen started thinking about rod design where performance was the driving force. He wanted to build rods that were sensitive and casted better. He started experimenting with guide spacing, and doing more research. He found that if he used more guides, his rods performed better.

Using more guides on his rods ran counter to what most commercial rod manufacturers sell. On a typical salmon or steelhead rod you'll find 7 to 10 guides. On a Highliner Custom



Rod, depending on the length, Amerongen uses between 12 and 16 guides including the tip top. Building a rod with more guides came after years of

experimentation. He refers to this as Guide Train Compression. Amerongen calls it, "The Sauce."

By increasing the number of guides on his rods, he found that is able to build rods that offer the advantages of increased sensitivity with an improved casting ability. "My work and my theories have been based on years of my own fishing career, as well as feedback from clients who come from all over the world."

Guide Train Compression is perfectly tailored to salmon and steelhead rods. It does not apply to all rods, depending on the type of rod it is. "However without a doubt, the biggest impact has been with fly rods, both single and double hand. After applying a little 'Sauce', they cast like rockets," says Amerongen, who swears by Snake Brand guides designed by Mike McCoy. "His guides make it all work."

Along with personal experience he read a report published by Angler's Resource, a distributor of rod guides.

He said three main points stood out.

Additional guides increase casting distance. "This is because more guides hold the line away from the blank and casting distance improves dramatically."

Guides contribute to a rod's sensitivity. "Additional guides add contact points and transmit information. Amplifying these signals with more contact points makes subtle strikes easier to detect."

More guides increase rod power. "Additional guides help the line track the curve of the rod precisely and allow the angler to use more of the energy stored in the bend for better hook sets and more fighting power."

Behind his shop he demonstrated Guide Train Compression theory by attaching fishing line to a cinder block while the rod was under full load. The extra guides kept the line from coming in contact with the blank. They disperse the load on the rod blank better which in turn increases sensitivity.

"So each rod guide placed on a rod blank acts as a sensitivity receptor. In casting, we build energy with the rod and transfer it to the line," he explains. "Once the cast is made, especially with a salmon or steelhead rod, we rely on vibrations of the rod blank to tell us what our bait or lure is doing underneath the water. In recent years the popularity of braided line has exploded, due in large part to its zero stretch characteristics, which helps to enhance sensitivity."

While it may sound like he's against factory-built rods, he's anything but. He knows his customers are unique, and not everyone wants a custom-built rod.

"It is my opinion that most of our top rod manufacturers today put out an excellent product, and deservedly so are the gold standard with today's anglers," he says. "In doing so, I also believe they must put out a fairly standard product in order to control costs and compete at the retail level. This is in contrast to a custom-built rod where extra time can be spent on small enhancements that are not possible in the construction of the



Under full load, a High-liner rod is built with more guides using Amerongen's recipe, which he calls 'the Sauce.'

retail product."

To say custom rod building is a labor of love is an understatement. It takes time and patience, as well as a deep understanding of how the rod needs to function, to create a custom rod that will excel in both performance and aesthetics.

"It is my experience as a rod build-

er that has led me to question how things work and how I can improve them. From this curiosity, the recipe for 'The Sauce' has resulted. It is a subtle enhancement that has produced some great outcomes, and it keeps me busy building rods that are fished in waters around the world."

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