

The Consummate RodCrafter

by Andy Dear

One Saturday evening many years ago, I happened to be casually strolling through the local video rental store looking for something interesting to watch. In my usual fashion I skipped the romance and drama section and went straight to the outdoors section in hopes of finding the latest and greatest Bass fishing tape. Little did I know that this was a day that would change my life forever.



You see I just happened to stumble onto a set of videotapes about building your own fishing rod by a man named Dale Clemens. Although I was a starving college student at the time, the tapes had me excited enough about building my own rod that I managed to scrape up enough cash to buy a blank and some basic components. After several weeks of studying Dale's videos and books, I managed to wade my way through the learning curve and finally ended up with a fishing rod that I had built myself. Now it might not have been the prettiest thing ever to hit the water, but boy did it fish good. Needless to say from then on I was addicted!

My guess is that my experience is not all that different from many of yours. In fact, I would bet that Dale Clemens has introduced more people to the craft of rodbuilding than everyone else on the planet combined. Throughout the seventies and eighties, Dale Clemens both literally and figuratively wrote the book, or should I say books on the subject of rodbuilding. Dale has what probably amounts to the top three rodbuilding publications of all time to his credit: Fiberglass Rod Making, Advanced Custom Rod Building and Custom Rod Thread Art. Each one has become a "must have" for any serious Rodbuilder's collection. Dale also started what would become one of the foremost and most innovative component supply businesses in the industry, Clemens Custom Tackle. And if that wasn't enough, he was also the man who formed the organization known as RodCrafters, who through its mission of "knowledge through sharing" literally caused the participation in our craft to grow exponentially overnight.

Through his work with various OEMs and specialty manufacturers, Dale helped develop many of the specialty products and services that virtually every Rodmaker today takes for granted. Whether it be rod blanks, reel seats, guides, thread finishes or handle materials, chances are that Dale had a hand in designing it and making it accessible to the general public.

Being part fisherman, part teacher, part rodbuilder and part businessman gave Dale the perfect combination of traits to become one of the most successful rodbuilders of all time. Ultimately though it was his generosity and never ending desire to share his knowledge with others that truly solidified his status as an icon in this industry.

Last year I was planning a fishing trip down to the Gulf Coast of my home state of Texas and I decided to take along that very first rod that I had ever built. It was while fishing with this rod that it dawned on me that all of the great memories I have of catching fish on that rod are due in large part to Dale Clemens. I decided right then and there that it was time that we paid tribute to the legacy that he has left on this craft. Thank you, Dale, for helping all of us create not only great rods, but great memories as well.

Dale Clemens

AD: I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your background as a fisherman and how you got started building fishing rods?

DC: Well, I started fishing at an early age, with fly rods. In fact, I fished fly rods before I fished flies. We stood in the middle of a stream and steered a worm downstream. So my early familiarity was with fly rods. Later, I think in high school, I became very interested in spinning rods when they became available in this country. It was a very exciting way to fish, and most of the rods and reels came from France and Europe.

On the building end, I first tied my own flies. Rod building came along a bit later. I thought, "Gee, wouldn't it be fun to build your own rod," but I was put off, actually intimidated by it. At that time, Reed Tackle and Hille's, two of the fly tying material supply houses, also sold a very limited line of rod building supplies. They sold kits where the handle assembly was already fitted and I thought it must be a horrendous task to fit a shaped cork grip to a tapered blank. That delayed me because I'm rather poor mechanically. However, I finally took the plunge and found that it wasn't very difficult at all! I fell in love with it the very first time I tried it.

AD: About how old were you when you built your first rod?

DC: Oh goodness, I don't know, probably early college. Up to that time I thought catching a fish on a fly you tied yourself was pretty terrific. But I found, as many have since, that catching a fish on a rod that you built was by far the greatest thrill. To me, it was heaven and I was hooked!

It was kind of crazy how years later I found myself writing a book and then subsequently selling the components. At that time I was buying supplies from Finney Sports and a new company that was coming along called Cabela's. I would call them often to order components because I was building rods for myself and for other people. One day when I called, one of the brothers that owned the company talked to me. He said they were getting frequent requests for information on rod building, but that they didn't know much about it. They just sold the parts. He asked me if I could put together a pamphlet that they could send to people. I said, "Well, let me think about it". I was very flattered. I did think about it. Being very task oriented, I carried a little notebook in my pocket and jotted down ideas whenever they came to me. When I organized my thoughts a couple of weeks later, I saw that it was a book, not a pamphlet. So I wrote "Fiberglass Rod Making." That title was selected by the publisher to distinguish it from Bamboo rod making, the historical approach.

AD: So this was around the early 1970s?

DC: I wrote it in '73 and it came out in '74.

AD: There wasn't the variety of components or technology with things like guides and finishes like there is today.

DC: NO! That is a whole separate topic, actually, which is very interesting. After my book came out I was very fortunate; it was picked by Field and Stream for their Book of the Month Club, and it sold like crazy. We got into selling parts and supplies about the same time and the business prospered. During those initial couple of years, the component market was tiny. The manufacturers wrongly thought it was infinitesimal. Custom rod builders were considered very much an aftermarket. In other words, we got whatever was left over from what was sold to the rod companies. No one ever conceived the idea of manufacturing some components of a higher quality for custom rod-builders.

AD: Specifically for that market.

DC: No! We were fighting a real uphill battle and it was an education battle, but it didn't take long, surprisingly. I remember one of the first companies I pointed it out to was Varmac. They were then the preeminent reel seat manufacturer in the country, and one of the top guide makers along with Mildrum and a few others. I had reached the point in my business where I was buying more of their product to resell to custom rodbuilders than they were selling to many small rod companies! I finally pointed this out to them at dinner at an AFTMA show. I laid out some of these figures of which they weren't aware up to this point. To say they were surprised was putting it mildly. They went "Holy Cow!" I said, you guys have a real market here, and it's time you started paying some attention to it. You need to examine what you make for this market and what you charge. Things, then, started to fall into line, and for a while custom rod building was the fastest growing segment of the fishing tackle industry. New specialty manufacturers appeared. Fortunately, I did a lot of consulting work with the various manufacturers. Fenwick, under the direction of Phil Clock, President, was one of the top rod manufacturers in the world. I served as a consultant to him regarding this market, and wrote a small booklet for them, "How To Build Your Own Fishing Rod With A Fenwick Blank." Their first printing was 50,000 copies and within a year they printed another 25,000. The other prominent blank manufacturer was Lamiglas. From their education I wrote a 20 page explanatory booklet titled "Graphite" that they distributed to custom rod builders. I did some consulting for Gudebrod, Varmac, Loomis and various other companies. I mention this to point out how the custom rod building market really blossomed.

Of all the companies I was privileged to work with, Fuji was by far the most responsive. It was never necessary to convince them of the market. They considered custom rod building the cutting edge of fishing rod development. They believed their success was due to making a better product and that philosophy dovetailed beautifully with what custom rod builders were seeking. After I got to

meet Mr. Omura and got to know him a little bit, he saw what we (the custom rod builders) were trying to do. Each year after the AFTMA show he would come to Allentown to visit for two or three days. He was keenly interested in what we as a group had discovered or uncovered in the past year. At that time Fuji was way ahead technologically in their industry, so it was a perfect meld. Mr. Omura even took part of my second book and had parts of that translated into Japanese, printed and sold in Japan.

AD: No kidding?

DC: Oh yeah, that was a real ego trip for me! (Laughter). Custom rodbuilders were doing much more experimenting than the rod companies were. Most of the American companies sat back and did what they had always done. Mr. Omura always wanted to know what we wanted and what we needed in the way of components. He was not afraid to say no, and he was very candid. Whenever he felt there would be a production problem he'd say, "No, let's not go down that avenue." Otherwise he would bend over backwards. One of the people in his entourage was an artist. He would use this guy to sketch out ideas. For example, if we described what we wanted in a particular reel seat, he would draw it. Depending on the input from us or Mr. Omura, the artist would redraw it as many times as necessary until everyone was satisfied. Those were some pretty exciting years and he was a very very exciting guy. His son is the same way. There are actually three generations in that family that have owned Fuji. They did a great deal for custom rod building.

Earlier I mentioned specialty manufacturers for our market. One of the first was Struble Reel Seats. The late Glenn Struble made the first seats for us that were not on commercial fishing rods. They were a higher quality for custom rods, and we put our own name on them. Glenn had a small machine shop with only three employees, but everything was automated and computerized, and he was simply miles ahead of anyone else. Just fantastic.

AD: So Clemens (the company) was just an outgrowth of you selling components on the side?

DC: Well, I guess the book really made the difference. Although I had been helping friends who wanted to try building a rod, get components, I was just buying them from somebody else and I wasn't making any money at it. When I wrote that first book a whole world opened up. I learned more after writing the book than I ever knew before. It was like floodgates opened. I was getting letters everyday in the mail. Guys telling me "Yeah, I've been building rods for two years or five years, but I do this a different way," or "You say do it this way, but have you ever tried this? I think it's better." I really learned a lot more after the book than I ever knew before!

You see, what it showed me was that there was an obvious need to share. You had a whole bunch of people

sitting around the country re-inventing the wheel. That's what all of us were doing. We were operating in a vacuum, all of us. Then the book showed us we weren't alone. It became very obvious that we needed a method of sharing so we could learn more and learn faster. "The RodCrafters Journal" had its inception as a newsletter for sharing. My printer convinced me it should be a small format, simple magazine. We never had any ambitions to be a magazine like "Rodmaker," which is super. "RodCrafters Journal" had a different agenda at the time. It came at a different time in the whole evolution of rod building.

AD: What year did the first journal come out?

DC: Well my book came out in early '74 and Rodcrafters got formed later the same year. I was still swamped with mail and people started saying, "Wouldn't it be great if we could get together and share some of this." So we had our first seminar in 1975. There were about 15 people there. It was a one-day deal on a Saturday. Two people came from as far away as Michigan, a fellow from Massachusetts, and some guys from down around Virginia. We couldn't stop talking! We had some demos that we did, and some guys called home and said, "I'm staying another day!" We didn't have a seminar the next day, so we just went back into the hotel and continued in somebody's hotel room! The following year we had about 60 attendees in Allentown, and we had seminars in a few other cities. Those were exciting times. They really were.

AD: I would venture to say that the formation of RodCrafters was certainly one of the most important influences on the craft of rodbuilding in the past 30 years. I don't think that the craft would have advanced nearly as quickly as it did had you not come along and formed a catalyst for the sharing and dissemination of all that information.

DC: I think you're right, and I certainly wouldn't take credit myself for that. I mean I was part of it, that's all. I was very lucky because we got into doing seminars around the country. When I say, "Lucky," I mean because I became a conduit. I would go out to California and hold a seminar and then maybe I would hold a seminar in Michigan. Two different groups with everybody being very open and sharing. I was fortunate to be able to take this information from one place to another, learn it all, and then write it up in the journal. I always made a big big point of trying to give people credit. Because most of the ideas didn't originate with me, I'd say "RodCrafter John Doe does this or that." In fact with the second book somebody criticized me by saying, "Gosh, every time you present an idea you say RodCrafter so and so does this." However, I felt it was very important to give credit to those who were sharing, because if you gave credit, then it would make other people want to share.

AD: Well you know, like most people who start building rods, one of my first purchases was “Advanced Custom Rod Building” and one of the things that I noticed was that you always gave credit to guys who were innovating things in different parts of the country around that time.

DC: Right!

AD: So that was in '75 when RodCrafters formed and then your second book, Advanced Custom Rod Building came out in '78?

DC: Yes, in '78 and then the period following right after that was what I would say was the greatest growth spurt, about '79, '80 and '81.

AD: How much interaction did you get to have with the various rod manufacturing companies, were they coming to you for consulting work and advice on how to improve the performance of their rods?

DC: Well, the rod manufacturers didn't beat down my door. It was those of them who made their own blanks and who wanted to sell to the custom rod building market. For those I either ended up writing something for them, or helped them identify their spot in that market. As mentioned earlier, a lot goes back to Fenwick and Lamiglas, the big two. In retrospect, it's also interesting what grew out of those blank companies. They each had different design philosophies. The blank manager at Fenwick was Don Green, who subsequently started Sage. At Lamiglas, blank design was done by Gary Loomis who built one of the most successful blank and rod companies. Practically everything in graphite design and development came from those original companies. It was exciting for me to be even remotely involved.

AD: I'd like to, if we could, change the subject a little bit. From all of the years of experience that you have in rodbuilding, I'd like to know what criteria you use or what facets of the craft you look for when you are judging the execution of the construction of a custom fishing rod?

DC: (Pauses) That's a very difficult question. But it's a good question, because it can lead me in so very many ways. It's difficult though. One area would be the quality of workmanship. Everyone attending a seminar had to bring some samples of their work. Among other things, this fostered very valuable one-on-one discussions between rod builders. As people were putting rods out I was frequently asked, “What do you think of this?” As I examined the craftsmanship in the rods I noted that older guys usually had more gaps in their thread and their threadwork wasn't as good. I learned this was most often due to poor lighting and a lack of magnification. They never saw the gaps in the thread.

A lot of those over 40 needed to use drugstore-magnifying eyeglasses and some better lighting on their work. So, the quality of workmanship, such as threadwork and finish, is one comparatively easy criteria to judge.

Beyond that it would be very difficult to apply a judgment because it is a custom rod. I might pick it up and think that it would not cast very well. Yet the person for whom it was made might feel it was as close to perfect as it gets. That is the difference in a custom rod! It's built for a particular person, his physical build, his style of casting, the fishing intended, his expectations. To each of us those things are different to varying degrees, hence the need for a true custom rod.

Some people say, “I build custom rods” but really what they build are handmade rods where the buyer can pick the color of the thread and maybe a buttwrap of their choosing. The builder, basically, has different models for different kinds of fishing. Where I live now there is a big difference between spinning rods for snook fishing meant to be used with live bait vs. artificials, from a boat or from the beach, under dock lights at night vs. from a bridge and that's not taking into account the person fishing the rod. True custom rodbuilding is fitting a rod to the angler all the way. I have always had a big bone to pick with that and you hit it!

AD: Before you started Clemens Tackle did you ever have a custom rod building business where you built rods for a clientele?

DC: No, no I didn't.

AD: So it was mostly building for friends and family?

DC: Right. Only the occasional sale.

AD: Once you got Clemens started were you able to work with clients one on one, or did you focus strictly on the component sales and consulting?

DC: I did work some one on one and built custom rods, but my big passion however was getting guys to build their own rods. I wanted to educate them on how they could build a better rod than they could buy, for all the various reasons. I worked with all kinds of groups, such as bass clubs, flyfishing groups, saltwater clubs, etc. As a speaker I could spend the whole time talking about why a person could build a better rod than he could buy. However, I recognized my need to build rods for other people if I was going to try to teach. You can't be just all talk. You have to do the thing yourself, and so I did.

I would say my forte wasn't in the craftsmanship or in the assembly of the rod, I was no better than the average good rod builder and there were individuals that were certainly better than me. My strength was talking with a client and spending hours, if need be, in helping him define what he really wanted and needed in a rod. Once that was all worked through, then it was just a matter of putting the rod together. I felt that maybe I did the “defining” part better than others did. Part of this is psychological, too, because once you have taken a person through that complete process and he has examined all the aspects he in essence has designed his rod, he is in love with it

before it's made! Then again maybe it was just my old salesmanship experience!

AD: Having seen the fishing rod move through fiberglass and several generations of carbon fiber, how do you feel about the current state of blank technology and design?

DC: Well, let me share my thoughts on that with you, which may be all old fashioned. I don't know (laughter). Concerning the subject of blanks, I would tell people that certainly today's graphite is the best material out there. But if you happen to have a fiberglass blank that truly does what you want to do, by all means use it! That's it. That's the blank for you! The same is true if you compare a third generation graphite blank that has a phenomenal modulus and strain rate with an older first generation technology blank where the numbers are not nearly as impressive. Likewise, I don't care if the price is \$500 or \$75. The blank that performs the best for you, for what you want it to do, is the blank that you should use. Some people just can't see that.

AD: While we are on the subject of blanks, one of the things that interested me that I never had the opportunity to experience was that line of solid tipped blanks that Clemens sold for a while.

DC: Yes, the Apogee. Fantastic! The plant that made those very, very thin tips for us in Japan burned down, and we were never able to find a replacement. We used a number of people's technology to join the short, thin, solid tip to regular hollow graphite to make the rod's tip section while maintaining a smooth dynamic transition.

The rest of the rod was made for us by Gary Loomis, and Gary tried making the tiny tips, but it just was not economically feasible for him, or us, to do so. It was definitely a product for the custom builder and not a finished rod company who wanted to sell rods for each line weight. We sold a lot of them, but not in the huge numbers needed for the tooling costs. The Japanese company had originally done their tooling with another purpose in mind. Then we came across them and they were failing in the other venture. We said "Could you do this for us?" and the Japanese looked into it and said "Yes." Personally, I think the blanks are fantastic! A lot of people still do not believe that you can build a flyrod that will cast a very wide range of fly line weights, but you can.

AD: Was that your idea, the solid tipped design?

DC: Yes, that was my idea. Multiple weight rods had been tried years before using the so-called "magnum taper" theory. This concept used a very stiff butt with the mid section less stiff, and a light, soft tip. The idea was that using just the light tip you could cast a light weight. As you increased the weight of the fly line (or lure) the mid section would flex more, load, and take over the casting. Finally, when a heavy weight was cast, the butt section

would do the work. Supposedly you could progressively increase the weight to be cast and the rod would load and do the casting. It sounded good, but nobody was ever able to make it work. You could get the tip to cast fine, but as you increased the line or lure weight and the mid section came into play, the tip was overpowered, flopped around, and actually destroyed the casting action. An extremely small diameter solid graphite section substituted for the top portion of the blank's tip section did work. Its profile was thin enough to reduce air resistance enabling it to be more responsive, yet it possessed enough strength that it was not easily overcome and be an impediment with heavier lure weights (it didn't flop around). A lot more went into the design, but that is the essence.

The apogee, how can I say this, required a certain amount of time and dedication to learn how to use it. Not a great deal, but you had to break some other habits. A buyer of a custom rod would be willing to do this. The finished rod companies didn't think the average customer would make the transition as easily.

AD: As far as casting techniques?

DC: Yes. A good example was when we first developed it. I took it to the show in San Francisco. They had one of the first real tackle shows that wasn't just people walking around mindlessly with bags filled with literature. They demonstrated things and had a number of casting pools. When I asked a local fly casting guru who everyone was watching to try the new Apogee, I requested he look over his shoulder during the back cast for about 10 to 15 minutes in order to adjust his timing to the new rod. He calmly told me "I never look at my back cast." I said that I didn't either while fishing but if he did so, now, it would be a big help to me, and was the quickest way to develop the necessary timing. He didn't do it at first, and had some problems. Finally, he did as requested and in about five minutes was doing fine. I then put on a reel with a line two sizes heavier. He continued to watch his back cast and did beautifully. Ultimately he cast four different line weights with that one rod. With a little attention to timing detail, anyone could make the Apogee sing.

AD: And that rod would cast how wide a variety of line weights?

DC: After we had the Apogee on the market, I took one with me on a motor home trip through New England to the Maritime Provinces and Eastern Canada and up-state New York. I caught smallmouth bass in Maine, Atlantic Salmon in Nova Scotia, trout in Quebec, and largemouth bass and perch all on the same rod while comfortably casting line weights from 6 to 9. There were no record fish. I just wanted to see if it could be done. I wanted to make sure I wasn't kidding myself.

AD: Were there a lot of products that you guys developed that never saw the retail market?

DC: Oh sure. One was a color sealant that we developed called Tru-Brite that we could never get some of the glitches worked out of, so we had to take that one off the market. We sold it one year, but then we replaced it with Brilliance.

We also did a lot of work with the various foam grip materials. Hypalon was a DuPont product that was very rugged but very heavy. In an attempt to use it for fresh water rods, more air was blown in during the extrusion process. It still was too heavy. We were the only company that developed a lightweight grip material that rod builders could shape themselves. We called it Customgrip. Someone came out with a light material but it was softer and very subject to cutting. In fact, monofilament pulled tightly across it would slice it. I don't know what all is out there now, because when I left Clemens, I took with me enough Customgrip to last me for a lifetime! (Laughter).

AD: When you were building back in the seventies and eighties, who were some of the rodbuilders that you worked closely with?

DC: Jack Justis and I became very good friends. He was extremely creative and very good with his hands in every aspect of building. When weaves first came on the scene, via the late Bill Heckman, Jack jumped on the idea and was exceptionally good. Gil Rowe in California and I became very close. In fact, for a few years the California rod builders were ahead of the rest of the country in thread work, but they shared so much and we all learned from them. B. D. Ehler wasn't from California, but he definitely was ahead of the pack. So many rod builders contributed that it would be impossible to list all their names here.

AD: So do you still build rods at all?

DC: Oh sure, you know, when I need a rod, or if I want something different, I build it. I don't make any rods for sale. I don't build a lot of rods. I'm age 70, now, and I'm sure that if you examined some of my wraps you might find a telltale gap. I need a lot of light and a lot of magnification! (Laughter) I have taught a few rod building classes that I have gotten a kick out of. It's averaged out to about one every three years since I have left the business. I taught one this past year. Small, I won't do more than 10 guys. Usually it's the fly club that I belong to here and down in the keys. That has been fun, sort of an opportunity for me to go back and revisit those earlier years.

AD: It sounds like the teaching and sharing part of the craft has been the most fulfilling part of it for you.

DC: Oh sure, oh yes, definitely. That was the best part of a seminar for everybody! You could go one on one with another guy at seminars. I usually didn't get much sleep

because I'd be up at night in somebody's hotel room. A bunch of us would always be at it, sharing and talking. It was great, I always learned so much. It was impossible not to! I was more fortunate than most because I got to go around to different parts of the country and meet different custom rod builders. They were a wonderful group of people.

AD: Obviously you have left quite a footprint on the world of rodbuilding.

DC: Oh you're very flattering. This is good for my ego, can we do this every week? (Laughter)

AD: I would say that a lot of people have become interested in this craft and associate you with it because of your books and the organization of RodCrafters. Out of all your accomplishments, what would you say that you are most proud of?

DC: Of having done that! I have been blessed Andy, put it that simply, that I was able to do that. I don't know how to say it without making it sound religious or corny. I am 70, and when I look back, I say my God, what a privilege! How lucky I was, I had my own company and it was successful. Here I am sitting in vacationland Florida right on the water with my flats boat out back on my canal. I mean how fortunate can you be and I got here by doing what I liked to do and having fun. And the fact that people looked up to me. WOW! I mean it still blows my mind!

AD: That was a great answer! (Laughter)

DC: I had a thrill two weeks ago now. A guy contacted me on the telephone who lives in Arizona. He said "I have been building rods since you first got started and I have every one of your books." I got to thinking the other night that I have these books and wouldn't it be neat to have them signed. If I sent them in to you would sign them and send them back, I'll pay the shipping?" I mean geez. I said that would be wonderful! He not only sent me the books and I signed them with a little note on each one, but he sent me some flies that he tied and some pictures of some rods that he built. So stuff like that you can't put a price tag on it!

AD: Well Like I said, I really feel that you have certainly left a big footprint on the world of Rodbuilding and the community as a whole owes you a big thanks for all you have done. Without your development of all of the equipment and chemistry and componentry, I don't know that the industry would be as far advanced as it is had guys like you not come along and helped shape it.

DC: No, Andy, the thanks comes from my end, really. 🐉