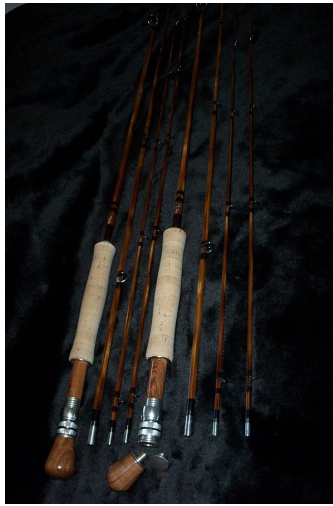


Salty Cane



“...Yes, a 9 and 8 weight cane, and can I have salt with that?”

Several months back I got a call from my good friend and neighbor Jim. “Hey, I met this guy who is really interested in your cane rods...” Jim had mentioned me to an associate at the local diner after hearing an interest in fly fishing during conversation. The gentleman was eager to see my work and possibly would order some rods – yes plural, ‘rods’. Soon after the initial introduction, we hooked up at Martyn’s Sea and Stream in Durham, NC. Martyn’s is the only surviving fly shop in the Triangle area of NC and owned by my good friend John Martyn. Since John has a casting range in the back of his shop and is gracious enough to allow me access, it is the natural place for me to take perspective clients for a test drive. We started out with a fast action 7’ 5/6 rod and then moved into a smoother, more traditional action 8’ 5 weight. I like to start this way with the fastest taper I build since everybody these days seems to be all about speed and distance...but that’s another story. After a short test cast session and getting my client to slow down and ‘feel’ the rod, he said something all rod builders love to hear – ‘okay, I want to order three rods.’ Wow, for a maker that works his cane rods at night and weekends with more love for the art than speed in mind, this was a big deal. So, out came my order book and my guidelines about deposits, etc... ‘...build out a similar taper from the 5 weight into a solid 6 weight with the same flamed tones...’ okay so far, ‘...but what I really want you to start on is a 9 foot 9 weight for Little Tuny and a 9 foot 8 weight for Bones that I can take to the Bahamas.’ Okay, so how would you have approached this? I remember I was pretty quiet for a few minutes without writing anything down. After a bit we began to discuss his expectations about both the rods action as well as their weight. To be honest, it was heartwarming to here someone that wanted to fish big cane rods again. Everything today seems to be focused around the idea that cane is not suitable for big rods; it’s too heavy, too slow, and not strong enough for big, fast fish. So without going to far off subject, I will just simply remind everyone that salt water fishing didn’t begin when we finally discovered fiberglass and graphite. There was life before plastic.

Anyway, when I was convinced that he understood what the final product would offer I accepted the order and began to plan out the project. I like a good challenge, and this project would test every skill I had in my bag as well as my patience.



Now in case you are wondering the answer is ‘No’, there are not very many published tapers available for building a 9’ 8 or 9 weight cane rod. I had to begin by finding a vintage taper and working it into something that met my expectations for handling today’s modern lines. But that’s not all. When you are designing a rod you must always go beyond line weights and actions and remember ‘how’ the rod will be used. Take the 9 weight and my client’s description of use – Little Tuny. These fish are caught from a boat both near and off shore in depths of water from 10 feet to hundreds of feet. They are strong and extremely fast. In approaching the taper I had to build a rod that would effectively cast a 9 weight line to schooling fish, accurately deliver flies from ½” up to 6” long, while retaining enough power to turn these little rockets around or lift them from sounding under the boat. In short, this rod had to have reserve power in the casting stroke and plenty of backbone. Now contrast the 8 weight. My client wanted a rod to catch bonefish in the Bahamas and abroad. Most of his fishing was done while wading shallow flats with rod in hand instead of standing on a boat, rod in holder. Bonefish are quite different from Little Tuny. Here is a fish that is very fast, can get fairly large, but inhabits water that is sometimes as shallow as 4 inches. Not much chance of a Bonefish ‘sounding’ in a foot of water. These fish too are known for their spooky nature. Small flies and delicate presentation are often required. In designing this rod it was clear I had a different set of guidelines. I needed a rod that would allow delicate presentations, have enough backbone to stop a speeding bullet, and be balanced in the angler’s hand while wading across the flats. (Notice I said balanced and not light, there is a difference. Balance is more important than outright weight – but that is another topic.)

It would have been quite easy for me to develop one taper then add or subtract from the station measurements to adjust for line size. Many rods are designed this way and I will not judge them as good or bad. It’s just not the way I see things. For me, good rod design starts with a vision of the angler in the environment that holds their prey. An

understanding of how the rod will be used and the tasks it will face are the key. If I had used the 9 weight taper and 'lightened' it for the 8 weight line, it would have worked but would not have been well suited for the conditions. Conversely if I had used the 8 weight taper and 'weighted' it up for the 9 weight line, it would have cast okay, but likely would never stand up to the power and tactics of the Little Tuny.

Okay, I knew what I have to build, and I had worked up some tapers to build and test. So now, let's find some suitable cane. There go another couple of weeks. When you consider that the base section of a rod like this can measure in excess of .400" and you want as many large, tightly packed power fibers you can have, not just any cane will do. I strongly believe in building cane rods that the end product is no better than the cane that went into the project. To me the equation is simple; cane + taper + craftsmanship = rod quality. Sacrifice on any one of them and the rod quality goes down. Of course there is the rod hardware as well, but as long as you use good hardware its all just window dressing to me. You can put a top dollar reel seat and guides on a mediocre rod and still have a mediocre rod. You can also put a good quality (but not fancy) reel seat and guides on an exceptional rod and still have an exceptional tool. As one maker put it, "...I can make it look any way you like..." By the way, I claim to be no 'master'. My rods are solid and I have gotten good reviews but I give myself a B on craftsmanship. There are always things I feel I can do better. When I finish my 100th rod, I may ask one of the Pro's to look and see if I can graduate.



Anyway, after calling around and buying some samples of cane from a few different sources and comparing them to my own stash, I had a reasonable selection of cane to work with, so on with the build out. While there is no need to go through every step of the process, I will point out a couple of things. First, I temper all of my rods, even the flamed ones. Flaming does drive out some of the moisture and does assist in hardening the fibers, but in itself is not true tempering. Tempering is regulated heat applied over time to bound rod sections. It has significant impact on the rod sections, not just the cane. The result is a rod that is stronger, straighter and lighter. Secondly, I pin all my ferrules. True, epoxy glues of today are super strong and should last a lifetime. But ask yourself if you have ever seen a pinned ferrule come off of a vintage rod? Pinning is insurance. It's there if you need it. To me its part of a good practice method.

What you see in the pictures is the end result of many hours of time in planning and working up two very unique rods. Both are 9 foot, 3 piece rods with matching components, wraps, bags and tubes. Both appear ready to meet the challenge of the task. However, both are individual in character, focused on specific types of fishing and prey.



Components:

Ferrules – CSE truncated Super Swiss, blued.

Guides – Hopkins and Holloway Titanium Carbide double foot snakes

Tip Tops – Hopkins and Holloway oversized loop Titanium Carbide

Strippers – Fuji Titanium Carbide

Reel Seats and Fighting Butts – REC NS Anodized Aluminum with Applewood inserts and Applewood removable fighting butts (from the tree I grew up with, thanks Mom.)

Finish – Absolute Coatings, Last-N-Last

Silk – Java Brown tipped with Gun Metal Grey

My client is now in the Bahamas doing what I should be doing instead of working on rods – using them! Since I haven't heard any bad news I'll assume he is pleased and maybe the fish don't mind a little of that 'old cane' around them either. All in all this was a very challenging project that I thought I would share. If for no other reason maybe someone will look a little differently at that big heavy old hunk of cane in the closet and remember there was life with big fish before we knew about plastic. I may never build a set like this again, but then again who knows. I can kind of see myself walking down a flat one day with a cane rod in hand, well maybe.

***Note:** I would like to take this opportunity to thank some quality folks that have helped me along the way over the past years. Without their help, advice and kind words of support I would not have been able to build these rods, and would have missed the endless hours of enjoyment in the rod shop, the smiles on my kids faces 'helping me', and the happy twinkle in a client's eye when they get that new cane rod. Thanks to Jeff Wagner, Dennis Aebersold, Ron Kusse, John Martyn and Charlie Ward. P.S. – I won't hold you responsible for all the bamboo splinters, cuts, burned fingers, spilled varnish, broken thread, crooked nodes, etc...<grin>.

-Buddy Davis
(A.K.A. 2weight)
January 2004