



## How to Choose a Fly Rod

**Derek McKenzie Fly Fishing Outfitters  
Australia and New Zealand**

The questions about this subject come up often and are ones that just strike fear into our hearts every time. You see, the best way to decide on what is the best fly rod for you is to ask someone who has a fair bit of experience to help make a call and most often it will be very subjective. As you will most likely find out, the only gear that is worth owning is the kind they own and if you ask 10 people and you get 10 different opinions. The fly rod is subject given to debate, bias and emotional nonsense, besides being fun. And in the main, none are terribly wrong. You see, serious fly anglers are very opinionated about their fly rods and in some ways, have a true romance with them! Just ask me! I could tell you about moving here to Australia from the states and having my fishing collection arrive in a box with the word "FRAGILE!" written twice on all sides and in the four common languages of the region. From there we can help with ideas for you to make your selection, your perfect partner if you will, with which to share the passion of fly fishing.

If Lefty Kreh were writing this article, I am certain he would say "The fly rod is a long flexible lever that helps you make the cast. It matters little if the rod is made of bamboo, fibreglass or graphite and for that matter, whether or not it possesses intrinsic beauty. What is important is helping the fly fisher to make the cast". There is a lot of wisdom in that but what makes this sport a lot of fun is the choices...and there are plenty!

All fly fishers are experts when it comes to discussing the fly rod. Add to this the fact that most fly fishers like to bend the truth now and again, particularly when relating a fishing tale to friends or neophytes. If you have already heard one or two, you probably became convinced that some fly rods have magical properties. That's true, of course. I know because I happen to own the only rod originally designed by the high Druid Priest of Stonehenge. Truly, the rod is magic. You see, the fish in those days were something to behold ...but this is a story that must wait for another time, for it was many, many centuries ago when I was but a small boy.

If Lefty Kreh were writing this article, I am certain he would say "The fly rod is a long flexible lever that helps you make the cast. It matters little if the rod is made of bamboo, fibreglass or graphite or, for that matter, whether or not it possesses intrinsic beauty. What is important is helping the fly fisher to make the cast." Later on in this article I will offer some insights into the mysterious and mystic world of fly rods, insights that may help you in your rods selections as you begin the sport or add to your existing array of tackle.

At the outset, please understand that there is no such thing as the perfect fly rod, regardless of the asking price. It doesn't exist. By definition, the perfect rod would be perfect in everything it does. Obviously, that's impossible. There are, however, rods advertised as being an "all around" selection. Quite typically, these rods do a few things well, but not all things.

This doesn't mean that an "all-around" rod is a poor choice. Quite the contrary, it might be perfect for you. So what is an all around rod? Good question! It's usually defined as a 7 weight / 9 foot with a moderately fast action. Importantly, the all around rod, like any other rod, is a product of compromise

So where do you begin the quest for a fly rod? The answer is somewhere in a complex set of responses to your questions. Some issues are cognitive, such as the fish you plan to chase and where you plan to catch these prized beauties. Cognitive questions and the response usually deal with facts. Your other questions and responses, however, will be steeped in your likes and dislikes. These, if you will, come from the affective domain of the mind. That's the place where attitudes, tastes and values dwell. In truth, what you like or dislike is as apt to be far more important in rod selection than all the facts I could hope to list.

In this article, I am not going to spend much time on bamboo and split cane fly rods. Whilst those are historic and may be referenced there, they are also quite expensive and usually one of the rods that are more sought after once you have been in this sport for a while. They live in a place in this sport all of their own and are a near cult in their appeal. They are beautiful to cast, a delight to the eye and have qualities unto themselves. If you do decide you love this sport or have been at it for a while, here is a simple questions and answer. Should you own one? Yes. I will just leave it there.

In the mid 1950's fibreglass became the rage for almost all fishing rods. Unfortunately for fly fishers, fibreglass lost popularity with the advent of graphite. Graphite had appeal fibreglass did not have such as less weight and better response. That, in my view, is too bad. Some very fine fibreglass rods were created that still cast extremely well. Here is an interesting little known fact. Fibreglass beats the daylights out of graphite in certain situations. I happen to have a little 3 weight fibreglass stick that is simply a delight. Only 6' 6" in length and in close quarters or small waters, it cannot be beat. As a matter of fact, the little rod reaches out nicely to fifty feet. Quite typically, as a graphite rod gets shorter it also gets stiffer. That means an inherently fast action that is more difficult to load with a minimum of line. Fibreglass has no such problem. The slower action enables precision casting, gentle presentations and better tippet protection.

Overlooking fibreglass as a viable alternative is sort of like shooting yourself in the foot and wondering why it hurts. The truth is improvements in fibreglass have matched the improvements in graphite. If you want to experience fly fishing, do not happen to be wealthy, and plan to fish sheltered waters do look closely at fibreglass as an alternative. In fact, I would put these rods on my "must have" list as part of my arsenal for fly rods.

Today's standard for fly rod construction is graphite. To be sure, there is an abundance of the graphite materials. Here's a sample of models you are apt to find described in almost any fly fishing catalogue.. Graphite II, Graphite III, Graphite IV, IM6, IM8, IM10, GL3, GL4, GLX, IMS, HLS, Power Matrix 10, Superfine, RPL, RPLX, high matrix, progressive taper, fast taper, moderate taper, slow taper, etc. Depending on what you want the rod to do, almost any of these graphite rods make excellent rods. All the graphite rods do share one thing in common... they are by far the lightest fly rods ever manufactured. Without question, the saving in weight is bound to make them the all time favourite of fly fishing folks who spend a lot of time on the water.

The construction of a graphite rod, however, remains a subject most fly fishers do not understand. Before I started this drill, I certainly fit into this group. I am still not into making blanks, lacking the mandrels, ovens, desire and time. However, I've learned a few things you should know. All graphite rods are not created equal. Using a pattern, graphite material, called "prepreg" in the trade, is wrapped around a tapered mandrel, covered with a special tape, and baked in an oven. When the rod chef finishes baking his masterpiece, the cooked blank is withdrawn from the mandrel and the tape removed. As an interesting aside, the blank has somewhat rough texture at this point. Depending upon the manufacturer, the blank is either left that way, sanded smooth and unfinished, or sanded smooth and coated with epoxy. Some companies even go to extent of have the rods clear coated not unlike a very exotic car finish, but as we talk about marketing and it's relative value to casting and/or catching fish, you will see how impressed with this I am. Not much...I am a fly fisher and will leave the fly fishing version of status symbols to those that take comfort in them.

Somewhere along the line, the term "modulus" got loose from the stable and some fly fishers, with the help of MBAs, PR guys, and advertising experts, got to thinking the higher the modulus rating the better the rod. Unfortunately, that is pure genuine 100% stock yard fertilizer. As typically used, modulus refers to the stiffness of the dry graphite fibres before mixed with the resin to become the prepreg. It is the prepreg, the combination of graphite and resin, that is important. Rather than being complex, it is really a very simple proposition. The best I ever heard, drew an analogy between prepreg and reinforced concrete. The graphite is the reinforcing steel and the resin is the concrete. Scrim, a separate item, is the thin layer of graphite or fibreglass added to hold the prepreg in place. In brief, the manufacturer controls three variables in the rod building process: the material, the wall thickness and the diameter.

### **Rod Blank Materials**

In choosing material, you are already aware that a multiple number of dry graphite modulus tows exist. To illustrate the first variable, consider IM6. IM6 is a dry graphite many manufacturers still prefer. Some might consider IM6 an "old" modulus material and therefore somehow not suited for a rod in these contemporary times. Stock yard fertiliser! This thought neglects a very important part of the equation, the resin. Improvements in resins have kept pace with developments in graphite. Thus, the IM6 fly rod of today is not the IM6 rod of yesterday. IM6 is, and will remain, a solid performer. Some manufacturers of today's more modern fly rods went to the outer edges of graphite and rod stiffness only to return to a less aggressive material as the fly fishing community simply did not enjoy the experience.

### **Rod Blank Wall Thickness**

Wall thickness is a product of the number of wraps of prepreg around the mandrel as determined by the pattern. It is an important consideration because wall thickness contributes to the rod's sensitivity, strength and durability. If you think about it for a moment, at this point the manufacturer faces a dilemma, especially when facing the third variable.

## **Rod Blank Diameter**

The taper of the mandrel drives the rod's diameter. As I understand it, diameter is the most important consideration in determining "flexural strength" or in other words, strength when flexed. Unfortunately, graphite lacks a lot in transverse tensile strength. Never allow the side wall of a graphite rod to receive a sharp blow, or even touch the edge of the boat under stress. It is apt to cause the rod to fail and if not now, than sometime in the future. Imagine finally hooking up with that trophy you have been chasing forever and hearing "that" sound? No thanks!

It is obvious compromises are called for in facing these issues of blank construction. Should the rod blank once completed be "thin walled" with a large diameter or should it be "thick walled" with a thin diameter? The answer depends on the manufacturer and the use envisaged. Develop a keen eye. The next times you are wandering around a fly shop trying rods using the famed "wobble test," compare the thinness and/or thickness of various tips and butts. I rather think you will see a difference when comparing one rod to another.

The "wobble test," by the way, is a well known testing technique and to use it, simply pick up a rod and "wobble" it back and forth to judge the action. As a valid test, it is again more stock yard fertilizer but we all do it. What you should be looking for is if the rod continues to bounce around in the mid section, how quickly does the tip return to the median point and come to a complete stop. We will talk about these in a bit more depth, but watching a fly rod twitch around is a bit of fun.

It is true to say that some fly rods are better than others. It is also true that price is not necessarily a condition for excellence. Almost all the large companies offer rods in several different price ranges. Being somewhat suspicious, I used to think the more expensive rods received more attention during the assembly process. I now know that's also not necessarily true.

## **The Rod Spine**

Finding the spine is a tedious process in rod building. The spine is just what it sounds like it would be, the backbone of the fly rod. I have seen rods in all price ranges that caused me to believe the manufacturer either skipped or slopped through the process of finding the spine. That is just downright shoddy workmanship and produces a rod that I would not own. Whichever term you prefer, backbone or spine, the location in relation to the placement of the guides is critical to rod performance. I not only want you to know why, I want you to know how so that you can check the rod you intend to purchase.

The effective spine is the longitudinal line on the rod blank where it most resists bending and shows the greatest rigidity. Under load, the rod will always turn itself so that the load is resisted or fought by the backbone or spine, the rod's line of greatest strength. The guides must be aligned along this line of resistance, also known as the axis of the fly rod. Failing this, the rod will turn under load to the spine regardless of where the guides are set. This is not a negotiable in fly rod construction in my book. How would you like to be fighting the trophy of a lifetime only to have the rod twist in your hand? This condition makes the rod dynamically unstable for both casting and fish fighting.

## **Finding the Rod Blank Spine**

Finding the spine really is not all that difficult. Of course, allowing you to find the spine is something that a lot of stores and fly fishing specialty shops may not be too thrilled with if you want to do it. Still others will assure you the spine is not longer important. If this happens to you, to borrow a great old quote..."exit Laughing." There are other shops and a lot of dealers that will appreciate your knowledge. If you purchase a rod via mail order and find the guides off line, return it. Be sure to tell them why. A house that buys in quantity has a lot more clout with the manufacturer than you or me. To find the spine, take a section of rod and rest the butt end on a solid flat surface. Next, elevate the tip about 45° and hold it lightly in the palm of your hand. With the other hand, depress the middle of the rod section while rolling it slowly away from you. You will quickly feel a point of resistance where it becomes hard to roll or suddenly (and physically!) jumps to another position. That's the spine. Now check the placement of the guides. They should either be in alignment along the spine or opposed to it 180°. It remains arguable which is best. Some suggest going with the spine increases distance while opposing it 180° improves accuracy. Perhaps arguably, many very top manufacturers and custom shops that hand test and deflection test each rod for proper guide alignment may use the spine to help ultimately locate the perfect axis position for each guide. The variation off the true spine is fractional and requires a great deal of expertise, and therefore perhaps beyond the scope of what you need to know here.

If you would like to practise this a bit, here is an interesting bit of information. All round rod shaped objects have a spin, including the very humble wooden dowel. You can practice finding the spine by buying a 1/2-inch dowel rod about 3-feet long and practise on that until you are confident that you have it down to a science. Interesting isn't it?

Now we might have headed this part of the article with "Everything you wanted to know and some you could care less about"...and that is up to you as to whether or not you find this background information interesting. It should at least be important if you plan to spend your hard earned money buying fly rods. The fly rod manufacturers range to the extreme and spin their advertising like the guys in Washington DC just before the election. Others are pretty straight up and you will find that they have earned a reputation for that as well. Perhaps the tried and true concept of "feel flex and fish" remains valid as the best way to test your intended fishing partner and especially in finding the spine. Unfortunately, few shops will allow you to fish the rod before purchase. There are a few, and these are rare, that will offer a "try before you buy program" and if you ask us, we will be happy to direct you to a few of these. Most of all, have fun!

Now let's get started on helping you to choose your first or your next fly rod...

## **The Fundamentals of Choice of Fly Rods**

Fly rods in a series by any given manufacturer is always changing, sometimes without anything more than a cosmetic change to the blank and sometimes more. Of late, a lot of fly fisher folks are really starting to question the manufacturers any why every year many of them seem to have a new top of the line rod that is substantially better than the one you bought last year. In actuality, this is most likely driven by a bottom line marketing hype to make sure that we have the latest and greatest and most expensive. After all, if we reach a level of superb performance, quality and intrinsic beauty there just has to be something better, right? Well, we would guess that if every year or so you need to come up with a thousand or so more dollars for the next "best thing" there had better be a darn good reason for it.

Now as you look through you next fly fishing catalogue at the rods, we defer to the spin doctors of the fly world and will have a little fun...

Did you know that if you add a proper graphite mix and a few boron fibres lengthwise in the blank manufacturing process you now have space-aged materials used in the last shuttle? Did you know that you can get a fly rod made from kevlar, titanium, graphite, high modulus proprietary graphite and boron or a combination of these? It is hard to wonder just what the fish make of all this and if they really are that discriminating when considering what is on the other end of that fly they are about to attack. In truth I don't think the fish care one bit if you have the right fly in the right place at the right time. Then again, I don't wear my Rolex when I am out fly fishing and think my tired old Bronco Ranger 4x4 will still get me to places that a new Cayenne will never see.

How many companies try this? Take last year's rod blank that was finished unsanded and sand it smooth. Next, paint it a different colour. After installing the guides, complete the finish with a smooth coat of epoxy and give it a different name. Better still, resurrect a model that has been retired from the line for some time albeit better than some of the current models and do this? Surprise, surprise... you have a brand new rod, at least in appearance. Okay so that radically new design you read about might just be the same old rod? Remember the manufacturer can control only three variables in the manufacturing process, material, wall thickness and diameter and taper. What a lot of them seem to really try to do is help you control your cash flow on the downside!

## **Choosing your Fly Rod**

Anything I suggest from here on in the way of a rod is of course subject to my personal bias. However, some folks have reported back that my bias is not all bad. When you select a rod, factor in these thoughts in your thinking...

The rod weight is in the right weight range for the fish you intend to chase.

The rod length is suited to the environment where you cast and fish.

The cost of the rod is sufficient to "hurt" just a little.

So far so good and no real magic here...yet. I will get to that shortly.

The first two points suggest that a light trout 3 weight would be inappropriate if you happen to be planning to live forever more on a small tropical island with your man Friday. In my case, I would prefer the alternative of my gal Sunday. Neither the fish in the adjacent saltwater nor the tropical environment quite fit the description of light trout. The third point deals with affordability. My experience suggests people do not appreciate or lean this sport quickly on much of anything that is too cheap and at a price that is too good to be true. I most always will be both. I think you should spend enough for your rod to be able to say "It hurt just a little." Your fly rod should be something you value and something that will help you move through the learning curve quickly.

### **Match the rod to it's use**

This sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? However, when selecting a fly rod, it is quite critical and really, the most important question you can ask. Unlike other types of fishing, a mismatch can just ruin the whole experience, so make your choice based on the most often intended use for your fly rod. And of course you will want to have a fair bit of versatility so that you don't necessarily have to buy two or three rods to get started. First, consider the size of the fish you intend to catch allowing, of course, for that occasional record-setter that is lurking about! Then think about the "size of the water" you are going to fish most often and of course the size of the fly you intend to cast. This should help you get an idea as to the proper rod, and remember that the size of the rod will affect your casting, how effectively you fish your chosen water and of course the landing of the fish.

However, don't overlook that you can cross over a bit depending upon the size of the fish that you are after. For example, you might want a "creek size" rod that takes nice stream rainbows or a "lake size" that is for the bigger brown trout tailing along the edges. Now then with one rod, you might not get the ultimate for either, but depending on your budget you can get a very nice choice for a variety of fish and conditions that is reasonably suitable for both.

If you are, however, one of the chosen few who will be casting for tarpon in one part of the world and giant river run chinooks in another and small trout in the wilderness in yet another...well, we will show no sympathy and just tell you to consider yourself fortunate and plan on owning several fly rods!

### **Doing the Numbers**

Fly rod sizes are categorized by numbers, or weights, and simply put the smaller the number the lighter the rod and it's intended use and conversely, the larger the number the heavier the rod and it's intended use. So with that, we would expect a pure small water small stream trout fly fisherman to use a 2 to 4 weight rod, a pure brown trout or estuary fisherman to use a 5 to 7 or so, and someone chasing bonefish, queenfish or even billfish to use a 9 to 12 weight. Of course then just to confuse it all we can add in the spey rods and the two hand rods and so on but for this purpose let's just keep it simple and stick to the basics!

The most popular all around rods are in the 5 to 7 weight category for our purposes here in Australia and with these, you can cover the whole range of trout fishing. For most estuary and saltwater species, you will generally not go wrong with a good 9wt. rod.

Of late, small stream fly fishing has grown in popularity and many experienced fly anglers are looking to rod in the 2 to 4 weight range and in quite short lengths. The selection process should make sure that your rod is suited to what you will do the most and give you just that extra bit of flexibility for the other things you may do occasionally.

The other number in the mix is length. In general, the 9' is by far the most popular. However that being said, many fly fisher folds are showing an increasing interest in the shorter fly rods beginning at 6 foot and on average, a 7 foot or 7 foot 6 inch rod is a very good choice for small streams. There are lots of variables like line weights and so on but that will either come later or in other text here on our website.

You can cast a good 9' rod long distances without much fatigue and have good control of the drift. This length is also well suited to most lake applications as well. If fishing smaller streams or in more confined areas of the bush, this same 9' rod will frustrate you as there isn't enough room. So for this, go down to, say, 7' if this is your main haunt.

Beyond that, we won't go into any long detail about the rod length selection. Just put simple principles and common sense to work. Now then, if you are standing on a boat in the salt and trying to hook up with a sea monster, using a fly that will knock you unconscious if you miss a cast seriously, then grab a cannon size and length rod and go for it! If not, match your rod size and length to your quarry and have some fun!

### **Get into Action**

Well here we go and unfortunately it gets a bit complicated from here as different manufacturers call the action of their rods many different things and have devised clever marketing labels for rods that really come back to basics but so be it. We have to laugh a bit at the analogy that we heard some time back about rod action and barbecuing a steak. It really only comes three ways...rare, medium and well done with any of the rest more a concoction of the person at the grill! Fly rods are a bit like that and with manufacturers often replacing common sense with marketing hype it will only get worse. You simply have to become aware of that, know what you want and stick to it!

So let's try to stick to basics here and basically fly rod actions can be broken down into three groups. These are fast, or super fast, albeit most manufacturers are pulling away from these, medium-fast to moderate...by far the most popular, and slow..medium slow to full flex. Now just for fun, try reading a few manufacturers catalogues and see just how much jargon they can actually put around a few very simple concepts. It makes the mind just boggle...but thankfully the principles behind all the spin has not changed and that is how much of the rod will bend when casting and where the bend occurs in the rod. Period.

First let's state a couple of simple truths....

First, none of us stand there and deliver the perfect cast or use perfect technique every time. And don't forget the other side of casting is hooking up with a fish and landing it with your enjoyment of the sport being paramount!

Next, when we talk about a rod being “fast, medium or slow” we are not talking about the owner or his/her skill levels but rather the characteristics of the rod, what it is capable of and how it feels when you are casting it. That being said we can move on and talk about rod actions.

A fast action rod will have only the tip flex that works from about a quarter to a third of the rod length. On the upside and in the hands of an experienced caster, these rods offer the longest casting distances and are great if you are fishing in the wind. This flex pattern in the rod is also suited to tighter casting loops, double haul casting techniques and so on. On the downside, these rods can be less accurate than others and are certainly less forgiving than other flex patterns. The reality of these rods too is that they are harder to learn on and therefore we would not recommend one of these for your first or only fly rod.

The next choice is mid flex pattern in its various guises and this is by far the most popular action being sold today. The flex pattern in these rods comes back to about midway through the rod. Not only are these generally the choice for very experienced casters who in particular do not own a stable of rods, they are also a great choice for those new to the sport. On the upside, these rods are more forgiving than the fast flex patterns and provide more accuracy as well. They are also a little more gentle on the tippets when setting a hook.

The final flex pattern to talk about is referred to as a slow or full bend flex pattern. In this type of rod, the entire length of the rod comes into play and often, will show bend all the way to the grip. It is unfortunate that these rods have not been more widely available, such as those now being introduced in modern fibreglass fly rods. These are a delight to cast, lend themselves to brilliantly delicate presentations and are an extremely good choice for the small stream rod enthusiasts. It may be more of a marketing concept that no one wants a slow rod but nothing is further from the truth. The new generation of full flex fibreglass fly rods are superb and not at all like their predecessors from several decades ago. From my personal collection and perspective, my favourite slow action rod is the bamboo rod I was given by my great grandfather. It will belong to my sons someday and hopefully theirs. On the upside, these types of full flex rods are perfect for smaller streams, tight areas and wonderfully suited to shorter lengths and lighter weights. You can fish a tippet that is nearly invisible and in the main, these may be far less expensive than many of the graphite rods of similar length, weight and casting characteristics. On the downside, these rods generally won't cast as far as their graphite counterparts and are not suited to high winds conditions. One last cast about fibreglass fly rods is that they are nearly indestructible. I still have one that was custom made for me by a fellow with the tragic name of Vern Hooker over 25 years ago. Vern did have a sense of humour. The inscription reads “Custom made by a Hooker”. Enough said there, but that rod is still going strong!

One last little issue that we will put here with the action choices is a quick note on what is called “dampening”. This is how quickly the fly rod tip comes to a stop and has to do with elimination harmonic vibrating after a quick movement with inertia, bend, and rod flex pattern all part of this equation. Damping has been a goal of rod engineers ever since they realized that the longer it takes for the rod tip “wobble” to stop, the more of this is passed to the line and this results in lost casting efficiency. At this point it would be fair to say that there is a lot of talk around the industry about this factor and only a few rod manufacturers have been able to achieve it. Remember what I said about the “wobble test” being stock yard fertilizer? There is your answer.

## **Putting the pieces together**

This is a good topic and one that makes me laugh because I suffered from the “multi-section anxiety” for a number of years. My personal rods for any number of years were two piece, period, and anything else was what we considered broken! Now the funny part here is that I was keeping up beautifully with technology in most everything else but had gotten a brain cramp with regard to multi-section of rods. This was somewhat understandable as I do have a rod building background and never had to go very far to be on my stream or fish of choice. I have chased some pretty big fish up in the Pacific Northwest that will show you in a heartbeat every flaw that you might have in your technique or equipment. So we had formed an inarguable opinion and were not about to allow it to be challenged by any fact! With tail between our legs, we did finally give in to logic and gave these a try or more so, one heck of a workout still trying to prove that we were infallible in our thinking! All right, so we were not fully correct! Okay, let's just use the word "wrong" once and get it out of the way. We were wrong.

This was not just my thinking either. These so-called "travel" rods simply did not cast as well as their 2-piece counterparts. Now however, the travellers are nearly every bit as good as the 2 piece variety. Instead of being shunned, the 3 or 4 piece rods have become the rods of choice. No doubt about it, it is convenient to break a long rods into smaller segments. Which would you prefer to toss into the car, carry along on an airplane, or ship by overnight mail? I did say almost and if I did not have to travel, worry about baggage handlers driving over my fly rods or the worst of all, customs agents mauling my pride and joy...I would still prefer the casting and simplicity of a two piece fly rod.

You might not want to go all the way to a 6 or 7 piece pack rod as they are not quite the same but do have a specific place in it all. But beyond that, think and go for convenience. You will give up nothing!

## **Coming to grips with your fly rod**

The choice of grip is often over looked when choosing a fly rod. This is a mistake as the grip plays a very big part in the comfort of your fly rod in your hand and ultimately in fatigue during those extra long casting sessions.

As far as I am concerned there is only one material to consider and that is cork. Even on our “other rods for other purposes” we believe the same is true. Composite, wood, hard foam or other materials are just a waste of time and sometimes money, add absolutely nothing to the performance of the fly rod and really have no purpose. Period. So with regard to materials for your rod grip, that is settled and on to this next part of this very short section.

The shape and size of your fine cork grip is important and here generally you will find three styles. The full wells grip is quite traditional, can support the hand in several positions and is suited quite to larger hands. The half wells is much the same however may also be somewhat smaller in diameter and easier on the smaller hands. Also very popular is the cigar style grip which is also a favourite.

Most quality manufacturers and certainly custom shops will give you a choice and unless you are an extremist with a serious preference, try to match the grip to the length and weight of your fly rod. Yes, we have sold a 5ft. 2wt. to a fellow upon request, but still cannot help but wonder why he would prefer to fly fish with what looked a lot like a champagne cork with a bit of a fibreglass fly rod sticking out of it. That said, it is about choices and as long as you enjoy yours, so be it!

There are only a few tips here that are more along the line of what to avoid rather than what to pursue in a grip because there are variables here that you can control. For example, we change how the rod is held during any one day just to relax the hand in a different position. There is no one way that is hard fast "right or wrong".

What to avoid? A grip that is just way too small for your hand and then just the opposite, a grip that is way too large. Beyond that there is a lot of room for personal choice and individual casting style.

Just remember, it needs to be comfortable and feel good in your hand. And yes, I know there is a joke just hanging here on that last line but I am a gentleman and staying well clear of it!

### **Keep Good Company**

We are now about to go to the forbidden zone and I am sure in the next few paragraphs will almost certainly offend a few die hard advocates of some of the big brand names and perhaps a few others along the way and incur the wrath of the Commercial Fly Rod Gods. But, if truth has a price this will be a small one to pay.

First, there are quite a few big names out there and guess what? Most of them do make a great fly rod. And they should if you consider the price! Sorry, but that is truth number one and you can do equally as well, or perhaps even better, if you simply spend time looking around, ask a few good questions and don't fall prey to the fly fishing version of a status symbol. There are several outstanding small to medium size companies that make great fly rods at a much better price and/or offer much better value for money. And don't ever forget service...many big name companies do this poorly in our humble opinion and the trend of late is to charge an additional or premium fee for what we believe should just be part of quality service from a quality company.

Too...here is a secret. The fish are not impressed with a label! If you are, maybe you should spend a bit of time reading no nonsense reviews and less on corporate websites? Don't misunderstand, there are far too many junk rods out there and a very few rods absolutely in a class by themselves. Your choice in a fly rod should be one that is high quality, one that you are willing to use and use hard, does not require you to refinance your home to purchase it and suit your needs as a fly fisherman. Beyond that, what else do you really want or expect? Yes, it should hit that slight pain threshold level that I have discussed. You won't regret it.

When it comes to rods and who makes them and who sells them, as far as we are concerned there are only three categories to consider...

### **Category 1 – Junk rods that are made poorly and are a waste of money**

And sadly this makes up a big part of the market. How do you know if you are about to buy junk? This has perhaps become more difficult in recent years with many fly rods coming from manufacturers around the world, particularly Asia, and some of these are actually quite good. However you should take the time to ask the dealer very specific questions about where the rod has been made and to what standard. If they can't answer your questions or tell you that it's an IM12 in a 46T modulus and can't explain that, guess what? Quite simply put, if you choose to buy a very poorly made rod or one that is in this category, you will most likely end up not enjoying the sport of fly fishing. Don't expect a bargain and don't live in hope. Save your money. You maybe should just buy a fly fishing video instead. Quick rule of thumb? If your fly rod comes with a spare tip, it is almost a guarantee that you will need it in short order. Probably best too not to ask about the warranty and repair service.

### **Category 2 - Really great fly rods that are made well and are affordable.**

These are by no means cheap rods nor fly by night companies. There are several companies again in the small to midsize range and yes, even a few big companies that are in this group and most have been around for years. One of the challenges here is that in the main, you will have to go looking to find these companies and they won't be on the back of the last international fly fishing magazine or seen flying a banner at the world invitational fly fishing tournaments. They are there however, and you should look for them. These companies will use a few "buzz words" like quality, tradition and value so make sure to ask them about it. Usually they advertise simply by word of mouth from other fly fishers that have already made the discovery. Often too, these companies will offer outstanding warranty and repair service. Reputations, both good and bad, are hard earned and well deserved. These companies are highly aware of this and will usually do more for you when you need it.

### **Category 3 - Really great fly rods that are made well and are way over priced**

Remember that there is only so much that can be done with either the tools at hand or the materials that we have to work with when a rod is being made. Yes, by all means there is a difference between quality and junk and yes, several companies do hold rights to a particular design or the application. But will spending two or three times more actually make that much of a difference to you or the fish? The ninety-five percent rule here is no. That being said there is absolutely no substitute for quality and if you are comfortable that this is where you find it, you are not going to go too far wrong by making a big investment.

In all fairness, we have been fortunate enough to have had our hands on almost every name brand on the market today along with more than enough of the Category 1 fly rods. And as promised at the beginning of this, are quite happily biased. We do have to admit, however, that in the range of the truly good graphite rods we have handled in both the Category 2 and Category 3 range inclusive, the differences are just minimal and we could probably learn to like any of them. However at some point, we have sorted them out for ourselves and hope you will too!

So what would we look for to separate them all?

First, have a look around for a few impartial reviews and opinions on what you are considering. Don't be a pushover for a review by a sponsored resource either. And too, if you cannot find any such review or opinion, sometimes you can just go with your own knowledge and opinion and not wait for someone to sell you one!

Now let's talk about warranties. Almost all manufacturers now offer a lifetime warranty on their rods to the original owner, and because of some of what we will talk about next, will ask that you register your ownership with them. Unfortunately there are those who are likely to screw up our good fortune. These are the same folks who are not into taking care of anything, especially a fly rod under warranty. With no maintenance, wear and tear sets. At this point, these fine upstanding fly fisher folks break the rod, lie to the manufacturer about the cause, and demand a replacement. The truth is the manufacturer can tell immediately whether the break occurred from a manufacturing failure or through either a deliberate act or act of stupidity. For those of you who fall into the former category, you have my condemnation. For those of you who may simply be accident prone, I offer the following from my own experience.

Always remember to use care when and where you assemble or disassemble your rod. Whether long or short, it is awfully easy to run into things with a rod, especially in your home. Without your abiding attention, you will learn car doors and big feet are evil things. Given the slightest neglect on your part, the ceiling fan will hum and turn with joy after eating the tip of your new rod. Then, too, beware of the motions and movements of the vacuum cleaner. They are sneaky, but quick. I know them to be dirty degenerate machines just awaiting the opportunity to take you to the cleaners. I watched in horror as a vacuum, without conscience, reflection or regret, slowly sucked the tip of my little 6ft. fibreglass fly rod from under my sofa and having taken its fill, tossed the splintered body aside. Grown men cry.

And finally, trust a reputation. Reputations are earned and usually well deserved. Names are bought and sold. Just ask any sports car enthusiast and they can tell you volumes about the difference and just how true it is. So can an honest fly fisherman with a few pieces of what were once fly rods gathering dust in corner of the closet!

If you have made it this far, you are most likely a novice to the sport and hopefully we have helped you, or, you are a seasoned veteran with a bit of time on your hands comparing your own version of the truth to ours. In any case we hope you have enjoyed what we have written here and appreciate our efforts to remain reasonably objective.

And now the last question that we always get and the end of this article...

"Be honest, what do you fish with and what kind of rods would you really recommend?"

This again is a fun question and one that you will get an honest answer. Very simply, we fish with what we would recommend to you and if we didn't, we would not recommend it. We have a fair few rods in the safely stored in their very own display case and you would expect that after fly fishing for more years than we ever admit to publicly. And guess what? We love all of them for any number of reasons.

We have tried to be very objective thus far but will leave that for a moment and say that we are really pleased with the rods that are featured on the website. Period. We believe that these are the best of breed in what we called a Category 2 fly rod...a great graphite or fibreglass fly rod at an affordable price and you will be hard pressed to find better. In fact, the industry has actually begun to recognise the impact that these and a few other small companies has actually had and is taking a look at some of its own practises and beliefs. Yes, there are a few big brand names in there too, mostly historic as they have come up with something much better and I will never part with my modest collection of bamboo rods either.

That being said, we will get back to being objective and tell you what we would consider as our own personal line up in the fly fishing arsenal that we use as often as possible...

Small trout and small streams – We use a 2 or 3 weight rod. I prefer fibreglass for very small streams and delicate presentations and should I need a more versatile rod in this category, my go to choice in graphite in a medium-fast action rod of about 7'6" in length.. Occasionally and for fun, we like having a go with a 2 wt of about 6' but only if in a charitable mood and seeking an extra challenge for the day.

Most trout and most rivers – In the main, we use a 5 weight rod and like the 8'6" or 9' length and medium-fast action.

Big trout, lakes and estuaries – We prefer a 7 weight rod and in a 9' length and again in the medium-fast action.

Saltwater - We used a 9 weight rod in a 9' length with a fast action. There are a lot of variables here, such as the heavy flies generally used, the target species, fishing in the wind and so on, but we believe that this, generally, is a good choice. Monster fish in open waters...nothing less than a 12 weight will do.

Selecting a fly rod can be fun if you make the search an adventure. Most do not. They enter the nearest fly shop and within minutes make their purchase. Buyers beware and do not fall for the old bait and swap of buying what the fly shop wants to sell you. The routine goes something like this... "The (fill in the name of the company) builds beautiful rods. Right now, they are behind in production. It may take a month or longer to get that particular rod you are talking about which is why we don't stock them. Let me show you this rod built by (fill in the name of the company) that is at least as good, if not better. In fact, it is the rod of choice by knowledgeable fly fishers who really know the sport." Where is that door that you came through to get in this shop?

Last cast? The words we just wrote are the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth...at least our version of it anyway. Enjoy the journey and I hope to meet you on the water one day!