

# **Too Much Cox**

**Why I Fish - April 2010**

**By Ian Cox**

It's been a very long time since I fished the Bushmans, just over 16 years to be precise. I know this because my son had just been born and I, in my ignorance, still believed that one could bring up children and also fish. Then there was the day itself. I accounted for some 30 fish in a long afternoon, My brother in law, who learnt his craft on the Eerste River, did considerably better.

So you see the Bushmans is not just any river to me. It has become the river. The river that has all the fish. The river I like most to fish. The river I had not fished for ever and ever. The river I dreamed about when I was not fishing. The river that I must fish very soon but hadn't despite for years constantly reminding myself that I must.

Well opportunity knocked on the last Sunday of the financial year. On the previous Thursday my wife asked if I wanted to drive to Dundee to look at a kitten. I was about to say yes when inspiration struck. Kids at boarding school, wife's away. Just paid my children's future and mine to the Receiver of Revenue and told a bunch of lawyers (my partners) that moving to expensive new offices would result in a reduction of personal incomes. Dammit I deserved a day's fishing on the Bushmans. In fact I had earned it.

My wife did not quite see it that way but a lot of persuasion and promises of regular attendances children's' music concerts saw me on the road to Giants Castle early that Sunday morning. The first hint of the morning was just beginning to brush the top of the clouds. It was still. The road glistened from the recent rain. The air was fresh and I was going fishing. It was beautiful. Beautiful that is until I remembered outside Ashburton that I had left my wallet behind.

**Bugger!**

Rewind, endure much derision from angry wife who I woke up again and in as short a space of time as I could manage, bliss, back on the road again. On my way to fish the Bushmans.

I got a call from the dearly beloved as I was driving through Mooi River. I had also left my lunch behind. Well no worries. This news had cheered her up and I can go a day without lunch but only when I'm fishing.

In double quick time I was parked off above Champagne pool and was making my way to the river.

Conditions were near as perfect as they can be. The river was coming off spate. Not gin clear but close. Gin and tonic clear perhaps. The water temperature was fresh. Some might say It was flowing a little fast but that would be pernickety.

Fish. Lots of them. Possibly more than the last time just had to be there. All I had to do was to get my line in the water.

Now I do not know about you, but I'm not one of those fishermen who get it right the first time. It takes a while before I find my rhythm. Stealthy approaches, sexy loops snaking a perfect presented fly to just the right spot don't just happen. My initial approach to river is about as subtle as elephants mating. So too with my first casts. Forget sexy loops. Its swamp donkey time and for some

time. In fact it takes at least an hour before this horrible state of affairs improves to the point where I can hope for the odd mildly flirtatious cast, roughly to the place I want, in a manner that hopefully would entice a very stupid suicidal trout to do something silly. Until then it is an endless round of piscatorial cock ups.

It was just as this was beginning to improve that I lost my glasses. I had to put them up better to see the snarl up caused by my fly wrapping itself many times around my rod tip. I had done this a few times already so did not stop to think that they might fall off. After all they hadn't before. And then they were gone whisked downstream to I know not where.

**Bugger Bugger Bugger!**

They were my very good ones. The ones that can spot a fish in a Texan's coffee pot. The ones that cost a small fortune. And I had left my spares in my car which was at the top of a very long and steep hill because I would never be so stupid as to lose my best glasses. There was also the fact that I had still not caught a fish.

Moments like these test ones resolve. Late breakfast at Notties becomes very attractive. Perhaps a little therapeutic shopping for fly tying materials and maybe a consolatory beer and sausage at the Bierfassel.

I steeled myself and went on fishing. I even walked up that hill and fetched my spare glasses. But despite my piety, still no fish. There were there. I know they were there. I spooked enough of them.

It is at times like this that the fishing writers talk of the joy of being on a river, of being close to nature. One is meant to marvel at a caddis crawling over a rock, enthuse over the cry of the lesser spotted whatnot, be awed by the flight of some raptor or another. Not me. All I could hear was my own labored breathing and if I looked up, well, I was going to land on my ass.

But I suppose they are right because as the day progressed I did manage the odd reasonably sexy cast. Still no fish but the sheer beauty of the place did begin to register. I even heard the a bird or two call though the caddis's eluded me. After a while the depredations of the Receiver, the perversity of my partners, JZ's rutting and strutting and the woes of the world in general began to fade away. I began to enjoy myself. I still did not catch any fish but it did not matter. It was a beautiful day and I was out there enjoying it.

Fly fishing is truly opium for the soul.

And the Bushmans. Well, It's still the Bushmans. I think I've worked out why I did not catch any fish. It was flowing to fast. I should have used a Czech nymph.

That is what I'll do next time.

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## Jay's Fish –May 2011

By Ian Cox



The dearly beloved took the spare to Peru. The heir and the balance of the brood decamped to the in laws. So it was that I met up with a few other refugees from marital bliss for a spot of fishing on the Maletsunyane River in Lesotho.

Actually it wasn't quite like that. Mario Geldenhuys took a bunch of fisherman to Lesotho this time last year. Both Jay and I were invited but could not make it. Jay asked Mario to do it again. Steve and Paul said they wanted to come along. Ditto Karl and Keith and voila, we had a fishing trip. The Peru bit was one of those lucky breaks husbands get from time to time. Like winning the lotto.

As you know you can't win the lotto twice, unless of course your name is Jay Smit. His wife went off to Australia and he caught the fish of a lifetime but I am getting ahead of myself.

As for the rest of us it seemed that we had all run out of whatever store of good fortune had got us to the Lesotho border. The rain was bucketing down and the endless summer we had hitherto enjoyed had most definitely run out of puff.

Still a fishing trip is sacred and Mario assured us that the weather was a temporary setback and that Lesotho rivers cleared fast so on we pressed on and after a spectacular three hours slipping and sliding over the 67km of dirt road that separated our destination from the tar, we arrived at the Semongkong Lodge.



It was still raining and yes, the river was in spate. It was also only then that I realised the true extent of this particular fishing adventure. I learnt that all seven of us would be camping out in one room. My fault I know, but since when does any guy worthy of his gender read the instructions. The words “fishing”, “Lesotho” and “lodge” was enough information for me. Comprehension has never been my strong suite and against all indications to the contrary I sort of assumed that lodge meant, well, a certain degree of luxury. The Semongkong Lodge offers that but at some cost. Jay had wisely signed us up for the cheaper option.

Seven middle aged fisherman in one room presents an interesting challenge. First no fisherman packs light. Second a bit of self-catering was involved so we had to set up a kitchen as well and third no bloke over the age of thirty can honestly claim to be a novice in the noble art of night singing. There was some compensation though. The company was good. Liquor was plentiful. The lodge keeps a truly excellent kitchen and there is an unexplored aspect of chaos theory that somehow ensures a degree of order in a small room over packed with seven large men, even without the orderly presence of Dave Smith. And guess what, no one really snored that first night.

So it was that day one of our trip proper dawned, overcast, but not raining. And as Mario promised the river was already dropping and beginning to clear. Not enough to fish so we spent the morning checking out the 209m Maletsunyane falls.





Fishing? Let me get the hard part over with. I caught nothing the whole trip. I did not even entice a fish near any of the vast assortment of flies I had painstakingly tied over a period of some months though Keith managed after a few minutes to catch a fish on my rod using my flies and in a pool I had flogged for some time. So did Mario albeit using his own tackle. No one else had it so bad though it must be said pickings were very thin indeed. The water was cold, the river, though it dropped a lot and cleared totally, remained too full for the limited number of fish that live in it.



Indeed the fishing was so thin (about two fish a day for the whole group) that was it not for Jay's fish this article would not be about fishing at all. I would have binged on about the glorious food, Steve's fine night singing ability (he wears ear plugs to bed) and his inability to remain upright in rivers or, after a certain hour, on land as well. I would have noted the sartorial elegance of some fishermen At

least two of the brethren sported ensembles that cost more than their wives wedding dresses. I would have explored the Semongkong's lack of sanitation and its concomitant effects on the river bank (landmines galore). I would have dealt in great detail with Mario's theory that a path does not denote the quickest or easiest route. One should instead, he says, find a ravine and head straight down it. I might even have given guidance on the importance of censoring the photographic evidence gathered by your buddies which, to paraphrase JK Rowling, would, if placed in the public domain, adversely affect any attempt to run for public office.

But there was Jay's fish and as another lawyer observed, a picture says more than a thousand words. It was his only fish of the trip but as fish goes I think you will agree it was definitely enough.





## The Origins of the Fly Tying Vice – September 2012

By

Ian Cox

(With thanks to Ed Herbst for the invaluable assistance with source material and advice)

No one knows exactly when fly fishing started. Dr Andrew Herd whose excellent book on the “History of fly fishing” and its companion web site [www.flyfishinghistory.com](http://www.flyfishinghistory.com) says it is anyone’s guess. The earliest reference to what might be the use of an artificial fly is Chinese and dates to about 400 BC but this is controversial. The Roman poet Martial also may have made passing reference to the use of a fly in about 100 AD but again this is uncertain. The good Dr Herd goes with the orthodox view that the recorded history of fly fishing starts in 200 AD with Aelianus’ book “On the nature of animals”.



Ken Middlemist ties a Green Highlander by hand



Lee Wulf demonstrating tying by hand on his visit to South Africa in 1989

The recorded history of the fly tying vice starts much later. In 1800 Samuel Taylor made a passing but nonetheless the first reference to the use of a vice in his book “Angling in all its branches”. He wrote

*“For the better convenience of making these larger flies, you should be provided with a very small vice, for the purpose of holding the hook, that you may have both hands at liberty to put in your materials, which will*

*enable you to dress flies that more neatly as well as more perfectly.”*



Early 19th century hand vices. Hardy's were using bench mounted versions of these vices in when they closed their fly shop in 1969. Salmon flies were still tied without a vice at that time.

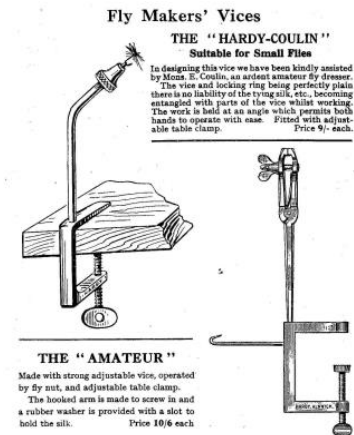
So why did it take mankind 1 600 years of fly fishing to come up with something as obvious as a vice? And why did it take another 100 years before the vice became even remotely popular. Why did professional fly tyers in Britain take so long to use them? And why was Hardy’s still hand tying flies when it closed its fly shop in 1969? These are all questions that have still in my view to be adequately answered.

Dr Herd advances a number of reasons for the delay.

He says the late entry of the eyed hook onto the fishing scene may have had something to do with it. Although the eyed hook is first mentioned in 1660 it did not become popular until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before then hooks were bound directly to the cast (original tippet made of horsehair and later of gut silk). This made tying on a vice unwieldy or so he argued. Though eyed hooks and vices became popular at about the same time I don’t see why the

presence of a cast (tippet) would make it any more difficult to tie a fly using a vice. If anything a vice should make it easier.

He also says that the conservatism of the British fly tyer was a problem. He observed that fly tying techniques were not book learnt in days of yore but were passed down by from one angler to the next. He says that techniques that were used in hand tying flies did not readily adapt to tying a fly on a vice. Anyone who took part in the clubs hand tying of a woolly bugger will agree that he has a point. However I don't think this is the complete answer to the question why the fly tying vice took so long to become popular. After all it can't be that difficult to switch from a one handed tying technique to the much easier process of tying with two hands on a vice mounted hook. Amateur fly tyers seemed to have mastered the knack fast enough. Thus while some of the earliest vices were hand held affairs Taylor was clearly referring to a table mounted vice and that was in 1800. The amateur fly tyers of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century also largely used table mounted vices.



Extract from the Hardy's 1937 catalogue. The Amateur was first advertised for sale in EG Meseena's 1871 catalogue and sold for 5 shillings. This vice was also known as the tacklemaster



The Hardy Norab circa 1911. The vice that converted Theodore "Quill" Gordon from hand tying.

It seems to me that with the advent of the vice you can increasingly draw a line, at least in Britain, between the professional who did not generally use a vice and the amateur who did. Professional fly tying was a skilled occupation A Hardy's fly tying apprenticeship lasted five years. One can well imagine the reluctance of professional fly tyers to give up what were well paid skills for what was an easier and thus potentially less well paid skill of tying on a vice. This bloody mindedness was not unique to Britain. The Catskills icon Lee Wulf famously refused to use a vice but he was unusual for American tyers most of whom had a vice of some sort or another.

I do not therefore think that the bloody minded conservatism of a few largely British professional fly tyers impeded the development of the vice.

I think one has to draw a line between fly tying after the industrial revolution and the advent of cheap manufactured goods that came with it and what took place before. A fly tying vice is, or at least should be, a precision instrument. Now precision instruments were hand made before the industrial revolution by highly skilled and thus expensive craftsmen. I think that we can accept that this would have put vices beyond the pocket of most if not all pre industrial revolution fisherman. By way of example Jay Smit's friend Faruk Ekich will hand craft you a Dama Seal vice for about \$2 500.00. (The presentation box will cost you another \$500.00.) True the jaws are



The Dama Seal vice on top of its presentation case



made out of Damascus steel but for well over a thousand years that was the only steel that was truly up to the job of making a quality fly tying vice. I don't think fly fishermen were prepared to pay or even consider the possibility of paying that kind of money. Hand tying was the only solution or if you lacked the time or ability to develop those skills yourself then you had to buy your flies from a professional.

But why the delay in the use of a vice or the development of a quality tool? The industrial revolution should have changed this. The new alloys and mass production techniques that the industrial revolution brought meant that it was possible to mass produce good quality precision fly tying vices. But this isn't what happened. The British vices that were produced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were rudimentary contraptions. What is also surprising is that these vices remained in production for decades. For example The Halford and the Hawksey vices were still being sold in the 1950's some seventy or so years after they were invented.



The Tacklemaster or Amateur, the Halford and the Hawksey vices. All developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Halford and the Hawksey were still being sold in the 1950's.

The situation was better in the United States. The Americans invented the first modern vice. This Thomson model A vice, which incidentally is still sold today was invented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The modern version of Thomson is awful. The older versions were reputedly better but I wonder if this is a case of nostalgia rather than hard fact?



The Thomson Model "A" vice, introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Halford gave up the Hawksey vice for a Thomson. Skues used a Halford!

I think the answer lies in the price that fly fisherman were prepared to pay for a vice. Early vices were cheap even by today's standards. Hardy's were selling the Tacklemaster (they called it the Amateur) in 1937 for 10/6. It cost 5 shillings some 65 years earlier which give you some idea on inflation in those days as well how slowly the vice developed.

The Amateur was the more expensive of the two vices it sold. The Coulin, which is very like my first Veniards vice bought in 1975, was a lot cheaper. The Hawksey was the epitome of fly tying vices cost a great deal more. It was sold for a whopping £1/15/6 in 1911. That equates to £141.00 in today's money or R1603.00.



The Hawksey

10/6 was about two thirds of the weekly wage of a farm labourer in 1937. (By way of comparison a fully dressed salmon fly on a 2/0 hook cost 2/6.) In today's money 10/6 works out at about R360.00 which is about what one pays in South Africa today for an entry level vice. That is just a little more than the current minimum weekly wage

of a South African farm labourer which should make one think! A Thompson Model A cost \$6.00 in the early 1950's. That's about R412.00 in today's money. The modern version retails for just over \$14.00 (excluding shipping) in the USA today which might explain the alleged drop in quality.

The situation was not much better when I started fly tying in the early 1970's. My first vice was a Veniards collet style vice. This vice was based on the Hardy Coulin which was developed in the 1930's. It did not hold a hook very well either. I resorted to tightening it with a wrench when tying larger flies. Peter Brigg modified his to make it easier to tighten. Veniards offered a number of vices at the time. The collet style Vice that Peter and I started with was the cheapest. The best was a cam



An early top of the range Veniards cam locking vice

locking vice very similar to the Thomson Model A. It also was not very good at holding a big hook. None of the vices that were available at that time were. If my memory serves me correctly, Sherman Ripley who taught me to tie flies either built his own vice or modified one he had bought to better hold a hook. So while I think Dr Herd is right in saying the poor hook holding qualities of early vices did not discourage their use, I also think it fair to say that this was because fly tyers did not have any choice. The inability of these early vices to properly hold a hook was a major

source of frustration and, I think, the reason for the development of the HMH and the Renzetti in the 1970's and more recently the J Vice.

I did find one mid-20<sup>th</sup> century vice that offers a glimpse of what was possible. This was the Hallows vice. This was made by the outfitter Farlow of London. I think that with a bit of imagination one can perhaps see in this vice the early genesis of the Law vice and indeed some aspects of the jaw of the early J Vice.

Unfortunately I have not been able to find out too much about this vice other than it was used by Tom Stewart in his 1973 four volume series titled "Fifty Popular Trout flies".



The HMH Spartan

I think the problem is that it is only very recently that fly tying vices have become any good. I think this is because that it is only very recently that fly tyers have been prepared to pay the kind of money that makes the manufacture of top quality vices financially viable.



The Hallows vice

The first truly well engineered vice is only 37 years old. I refer to the HMH Vice. This vice has become the preferred vice of the American production fly tyer. However, this sort of quality does not come cheap. I

don't know what an HMH cost back in 1975 but you will pay \$200.00 for one today and that excludes shipping costs. (Frontier fly fishing will sell you one for R2020.00)



The Renzetti Presentation 3000 which like the J Vice was invented in a garage.

The Renzetti Presentation 3000 arrived on the scene shortly thereafter. This is the vice that has for decades defined what one can expect of a top end vice. It has never been cheap. It originally cost what \$195.00. It currently retails for \$365.00 excluding shipping.

The other iconic vice, the Regal arrived a little later. It wasn't cheap either. A basic regal vice will cost about \$165.00 today excluding shipping. It does not stop there. A Petijean vice will set you back \$792.00 without the trimmings and a basic C&F Reference vice will cost you \$800.00 again excluding shipping. (R6 800.00 from Frontier while stocks last!) A Law vice will cost at least \$900.00 that is if you can still find one.



The Regal

Finally it would not be proper for a Durban Fly Tyers Club member to finish an article on vices without mentioning the J Vice. Jay's vice is not cheap but nowhere near as expensive as most of the vices it compares with. The basic vice kit starts at \$410.00 excluding shipping. I do not think anyone in the club will disagree with me when I say that in the J Vice we have one of the best fly tying vices in the world. If one takes into account that the Pro Jaw will handle anything from a size 32 hook to a 4/0 with equal aplomb then we also have the most versatile vice in the world. The midge jaws are still, I think, the stuff of magic. That Jay Smit has achieved this out of his garage is a testament to both his inventive genius and what can be done with these days with computerised milling machines.

Even so and Jay must forgive me for saying this. These are crazy prices when compared with what fly tyers were prepared to pay for a vice 40 years ago. This is not to say that the modern top end vice is overpriced. They are not. Their price is what you pay for excellence. And that is really it. If enough people are prepared to pay for excellence then excellence is what you will get. Whether excellence is necessary or even affordable is another thing entirely.

And how is it that mankind can suddenly afford to pay so much more for a non-essential item like a vice? I think we are seeing the buying power of the baby boomers at play. 1975, which is when the HMH hit the market, is about when the first of the baby boomers began to earn the kind of money that pays for expensive toys like a top end fly tying vice and indeed all the other accoutrement of a materialistic lifestyle. Think I'm wrong? Just look at the age profile of the Durban Fly Tyers. Then there is fact (Wikipedia) that in 2004 baby boomers accounted for about 80% of Britain's luxury spending. What's more baby boom spending was expected to go into decline during 2007 to 2009. Now don't those dates ring a bell! So the reason why fly tying vices have got so good is that many of us are profligates who are squandering our children's future on jollies like fly tying. If I am right then we are currently at a developmental apex both in respect of fly fishing generally and in respect of the development of the vice. So enjoy it while it lasts because it may not get any better.



**Choices Choices –December 2012**  
**A Look at Fly Tying Threads**  
by  
**Ian Cox**

I am indebted to Marco Breschi in the preparation of this article. Marco is a textile man born into a dynasty of textile people. Indeed it would not surprise me if some ancestor of Marco had a hand in the manufacture of Julius Caesar's togas! However while Marco's expertise in these matters is, as you will see, very considerable, I must caution that I am a layman and this article is written for laymen. Any errors are mine.

I think good fly tying rests on a three cornered stool comprising a vice that can hold the hook, a sharp pair of scissors and the right thread. The right thread is generally a thread that ties the most durable neatest fly with the least amount of hassle. For me tidy fly tying involves using as little thread as possible. Thread is the glue that holds a fly together. As such it should, for the most part, do its work unseen. Thus for me the right thread is one that is easy to use while being strong enough to do the job without damaging the material or adding bulk to the fly. This is not difficult to achieve if you only tie large flies. If you never tie smaller than a size 6 hook most of the commonly available fly tying threads will do the job. Indeed you could in most cases get away with raiding your wife's sewing cupboard. However fishermen who like me spend most of their time tying small flies aren't so lucky. The right thread is vital when tying a tidy small fly. The choice of that thread invariably involves striking a balance between strength and thickness (size) while faced with a bewildering array of choices.



A modest collection of threads

I hope this article will make it easier to deal with those choices. I should caution that the right choice of thread is a marriage of fact and opinion. This article is my idea of that marriage. Doubtless many will disagree.

I think one can simplify the choices one has to make into three big ones. They are:

1. Choice of material.
2. Size.
3. Flat round or mono.

## Choice of material

I don't think many of us give much thought to the material our thread is made out of. We should because this largely influences its strength.

1. Silk is for example stronger than cotton which is why nobody has used cotton for a very long time.
2. Nylon is stronger than silk and most polyesters for that matter, but Polyester stretches less.
3. There is also rayon. Rayon is a natural thread in that it is made out of cellulose. It is not as strong as either nylon or polyester but is more lustrous than both, and a lot cheaper than silk.
4. Kevlar is the strongest of them all but is bulky, has a tendency to cut material and is next to impossible to cut.

Most fly tying threads are made from polyester or rayon.

Silk is still used for tying salmon flies and for spider bodies where a lustrous translucency is required. Rayon does the job almost as well. Pearsall's is still famous as a supplier of fly tying silks though I am told that the real Salmon fundi's prefer some horribly expensive silks out of Japan. If you want to elevate your status to "flay" fisherman and add some Pearsall's to your collection then you have to look no further than Craig Thom and his Stream X store [www.streamx.co.za](http://www.streamx.co.za). He also sells a range of rayon threads. Truth be told, there is not much that is esoteric in the world of fly fishing that he does not stock.

There is also a relative newcomer to the market which I think is going to change things. Gelspun or GPC threads are made from an ultra high modulus polyethylene polyester blend that is a lot thinner than Kevlar and less likely to cut your material but almost as strong. While not as difficult to cut it is just as capable of destroying your bobbin or scissors.

Marco kindly pointed out to me that the use of the term Gelspun is a misnomer. This is what he wrote:

*"Gel spun" is technically incorrect. In fact this term describes the actual extrusion or spinning method employed in the manufacture of the multifilament yarn or thread. The difference between a dry spun and a wet/gel spun fibre is that the spinnarette is submerged in a solution of solvent or other coagulating agent. This results in a much smaller diameter fibre being extruded through the spinnarette. The polymer is in a "gel" state which means only partially liquid. This enhances the degree of orientation or crystallinity of the molecular chains. In other words, the closer the polymer chains are to one another the stronger the*



Veniard Silks circa 1975



Gudebrod's GPC or "Gelspun" thread Stocked once by Complete Angler

*bond and therefore the higher the tensile strength. This “orientation” of the molecular structure is enhanced by a process called “cold drawing” where the thread is stretched under controlled tension in order to align the molecular chains parallel and close to each other. This in turn reduces the amorphous regions within the fibre thus rendering these fibre types extremely hydrophobic and therefore with very low moisture absorbancy. This can also explain their poor dyeability in an aqueous medium when in thread form and therefore answers your comment of leaving the tier with “inky fingers”. Usually the colouration of these fibre types would be in the “dope” in other words the introduction of pigment to the viscous polymer prior to extrusion through the spinnarette. This, however, would only be viable for large volumes of the same shade and not relevant for the small volumes used in fly tying. High modulus Polyethylene and Aramid (Kevlar) fibres are produced by this process.*

How is that for detail? Eat your heart out Ed Herbst!! The Semperfli Nano silk that Stream X sells is a Gelspun thread. So is Benecchi’s Ultrastrong and Roman Moser’s Powersilk. Gudebrod has one too. I believe Waspi also offers a GPC thread as part of its UTC range though I have not come across it locally.

A word of warning. Gelspun or GPC threads are not easy to use. They are slippery, fray easily and will easily slip a half hitch. They also do not hold their colour leaving the tier with inky fingers. However their strength, flatness and size make for a very tidy tie especially when tying on small hooks. I have for example tied a parachute fly on a size 32 hook using Nano silk. I did break a couple hooks in the process! Yes its that strong. Nano silk is also wonderfully translucent.



### Thickness



Veevus 12/0 on Lt and Nano silk 12/0 on Rt. Note the twist in the Veevus thread and its effect on thickness.

The thickness of the thread has a massive impact on the neatness of the fly you are tying. Using thick thread to tie a small fly makes the whole job that much more difficult.

So how to you measure thickness? Manufacturers of fly tying threads use one of two measurement systems.

The older system, which many suppliers of fly tying thread still use, is the Chenille Company’s old ought system. Gudebrod (Orvis), Semperfli, Gordon Griffiths Sheer, Benecchi and Roman Moser are amongst those who use it. In terms of this system threads get thinner the more noughts they have. Thus a 7/0 or 7 nought thread is thinner than a 1/0 thread. This system is open to abuse witness the huge variations of thread sizes in the threads supplied by manufacturers who still use it.



Christopher Helm's table, available on [www.swtu.org/pdfs/fly\\_tying/Threads.pdf](http://www.swtu.org/pdfs/fly_tying/Threads.pdf) graphically demonstrates how big and bewildering these discrepancies can be.

UTC and Danville use the technically more accurate denier method of measurement. Gudebrod is also beginning to use it albeit in fine print. A denier is the weight in grams of 9000 metres of thread. Thus, the lower the score on the denier scale, the smaller the thread. There is no reliable method of converting the one scale to the other. This is because the ought scale is so unreliable.

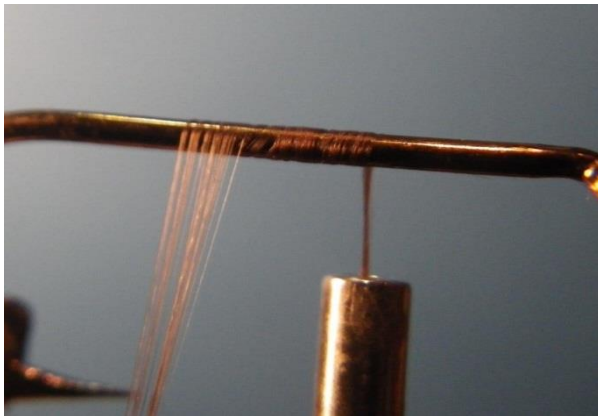


Note the difference in denier rating despite same /0 measurement

An important point to note is that the ought and denier ratings are no indicator of strength. Gelspun or GPC threads are much stronger than other ones despite being a lot thinner. Furthermore, strength varies considerably amongst polyester rayon and nylon threads.

Marco tells me that neither system of measurement is still used in the textile industry. The industry is standardising on the Tex system. This system is similar to the denier system in that it measures the weight in grams of 1000 metres of yarn.

#### Flat or Round or Mono

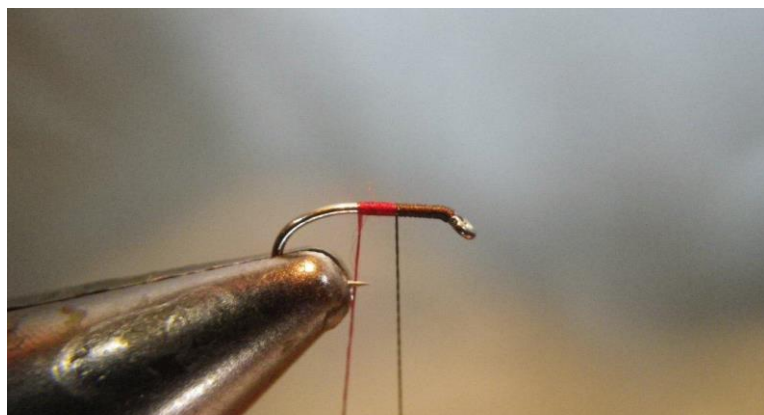


Most fly tying threads are flat, that is to say they are made from continuous filaments. Sometimes these are lightly twisted and sometimes not. The untwisted version of these threads is known as floss.

Marco advised me that:

*The insertion of twist in a yarn or thread imparts strength and the twist direction imparted by the spinning machine can either be S or Z, left or right. You can determine this by looking at the thread and observing the direction of the fibre alignment to the thread axis.*

The advantage of floss as opposed to a thread that has a twist to it is that it bulks up less and is less likely to cut the material it is holding down. They also lend themselves to split thread techniques. Their disadvantages are that they are not as strong and are more likely to fray against the point of the hook. The twist that manufactures sometimes put into flat threads strikes me as an attempt at a compromise.



Left Sheer 14/0 flat compared with the Veevus 12/0 round

The slight twist gives the thread added strength and makes them easier to work with. They can also easily be flattened by untwisting them should the need arise.

All round threads are twisted. Most are made up of two or more chemically bonded threads twisted together so they cannot be flattened. Sewing machine threads are made this way or are woven around a monochord core. While round threads offer more strength for size their inability to be splayed flat against the hook means that they also bulk up more. I am not a fan of round threads even though it is theoretically possible to make a stronger thinner thread this way. My sense whatever infinitesimal advantage is gained by the added strength is lost by the fact that the thread cannot be made to lie flat. I don't think I am alone in this which may explain why the Veevus 12/0 thread is the only round fly tying thread I am aware of.

I am also not a fan of monofilament threads though I do sometimes use them when tying salt water flies. For me you may as well be using fishing line. In fact you are using fishing line. The exception is Spider Web which is a 30 denier monofilament suitable for very fine work if you can control a thread that will snap just by you looking at it. It has a breaking strain of only 5 grams. Ed Herbst speaks highly of a thread called UNI Caenis which he says is much better than Spider Web. At 20 denier it's got to be the thinnest thread around but with a breaking strain of 3 grams there can't be many fly tiers sufficiently skilled to use it. You can get it from the African Fly Angler [www.africanflyangler.co.za](http://www.africanflyangler.co.za) who also stock Veevus.

### Personal Choices

So what threads do I use?

1. First off for the reasons stated above, I prefer a flat thread to a twisted one.
2. Like most members I started with the UTI range for no other reason than the Complete Angler stocked it. Like everyone else found that UTI's threads do the trick when tying larger flies. However I found that the UTI 70 denier thread broke too easily. It is also bulky and since I seldom tie a fly on anything bigger than a size 14 hook this and posed a problem.
3. The Danville equivalent, the Flymaster 6/0 70 denier waxed thread filled the gap admirably, strength wise but it's also too bulky. Kingfisher and The Complete Angler both stock Danville threads.
4. I frolicked briefly with Gudebrod and Orvis but in truth never use them.
5. This problem was solved when Tony Kietzman introduced me to Gordon Griffiths Sheer 14/0 thread. Notwithstanding the fact that it is poorly wound and is thus prone to slip of its reel. It is still my go to thread. You can get it from Stream X.
6. I am also increasingly using Semperfli's Nanosilk for spinning hair on smaller flies, when tying very small flies and when tying buzzer patterns. I find that its translucency strength and size far outweigh the disadvantage of its slipperiness when used in these applications.



My choices are not necessarily everyone else's. Tony Kietzman no longer likes Sheer. His new love is one of Benecchi's offerings. Ed Herbst doesn't like Nano silk preferring Veevus 12/0 or Roman

Moser's Powersilk instead. Small fly guru Ed Engle swears by Gudebrod 10/0. Oliver Edwards also uses Roman Moser's Powersilk. ED Herbst tells me that Daryl Lampert also uses Sheer and Nano silk. Not many of these choices make David Klausmeyer's (editor of The Fly Tyer Magazine) list of preferred threads for small flies. He lists, Gudebrod 10/0 (45 Denier) Eurothread 12/0 (45 Denier), UNI Caenis (20 Denier), Bennichi 12/0 (70 Denier) UNI 17/0 (50 Denier) and Ultra GSP (50 denier). As you can see it is a fickle business.

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## Phi, proportion and the art of fly tying - August 2013

By Ian Cox



Most if not all fly tying instructions manuals will at some stage deal with the question of proportion. While some of the more advanced manuals will refer to the insect you are trying to reproduce, most will point out that correct proportions are an important trigger and then proceed to suggest the body or abdomen of your fly should be a tad over half the length of the shank, the thorax a tad over a third and the head what is left. If you take the trouble to measure that out you get roughly the following proportions:

- Abdomen: 63%
- Thorax 23%
- Head 14%

That is the [golden ratio](#) or Phi. For those who are mathematically minded this is the ratio of 1:1.618. Now you can go mad trying to find meaning in Phi so I am not going to try. What we do know is that it is a ratio that is visually pleasing to the human eye. And no doubt it is pleasing to the eye because approximations of it be found in so many things that occur naturally around us, like insects for example and, for that matter, the face of a beautiful woman. And because of that we tend to see it where perhaps it isn't and read far more significance into it than we ought. As I said, I don't want to go there. Suffice to say that if you tie a fly that maintains those proportions, chances are other fly tyers will speak warmly of your tying abilities.

So:

- a tail will look good on a fly if it is either about a third or one and two thirds of the length of the fly.
- a hackle looks good if it is one and a half times the gape of the hook though you can get away with longer than that if it is in proportion to the shank.

This is what fly tyers like Gordon Van Der Spuy call balance.

So when tying a fly it is not a bad idea to visualize that balance before you put thread to hook. Ask yourself:

- how long should the tail be?
- what is the shape and size of the abdomen?
- ditto the thorax and the head and the hackle.

And if you find that difficult lay down a bed of white thread and mark it out. And above all take care when tying tails wings or hackles to measure your material.

This of course all begs the question; what is it you are trying to imitate? Hence the reference to [entomology](#) later in this Bobbin where you will find that some of what fish eat is disproportionate and downright ugly. So don't treat what is written above as an absolute. It isn't. But as a general rule of thumb it is not at all bad.

Of course you will want to scrunch up your perfect creation when you come to fish it. The adage “don’t kick a man when he is down” exists only in the mind of man. It does not exist in nature. There, and I suspect, often in real life, the rule is; prey on the weak. Low hanging fruit is so much more nutritious than the stuff that is hard to get. So a crippled looking fly is far more likely to be attractive to a predatory fish than a healthy one.

This is why so many rotten fly tyers say that they tie badly on purpose because untidy flies catch fish. That isn’t really true. Picasso could get away with a squiggle because under his hand it is a distillation of something beautiful. I agree with Gordon van der Spuy, a beautifully executed fly that is scrunched up to look crippled is more likely to catch fish than one that was rubbish to start with.

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