

Fly Tying – A personal perspective

By

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I started fly fishing aged eight when my father returned from a Scottish holiday armed with a Hardy Jet 9ft 3 piece beauty I still use today. It took me two years to catch my first trout but even so I was hooked from the first go. Fly tying came a little later. I contracted jaundice during my first year at Michaelhouse, and my mother, at her wits end with what to do with a seriously hyper active ADD pubescent teenager, asked my fly fishing mentor Sherman Ripley what she should do.

“Get him fly tying” said Sherman and so started another great love. My starter kit from what was then Kings soon grew into a complete outfit from Veniards whose catalogue I could recite by heart. I made the exalted ranks of the school fly fishing club (limited to 6 members) and such was my focus on things trout that it was touch and go whether I would pass matric.

I was fortunate in those early days to have wonderful role models. My father was a keen though late starting fly fisherman who was friend with many great fisherman and fly tyers albeit of the Hardy’s generation. Thus although I never got to fish with Tom Sutcliffe and his mates, I did fish with many of the earlier generation of fly fishers such as Sherman Ripley, Bill Bainbridge, John Milne, Rhino Cathcart, Dennis Pittaway, Jack Acutt and Jack Blackman. The flies I tied at that time were all the classics so you can imagine what it meant to be tying them again after all these years.

It is also worth mentioning that it easy not that easy to get materials in those days. Mail order to South Africa required that one first obtained an import permit. Alternatively you had to persuade a relative, in this case my grandmother, to make the trip to Croydon in London and get your booty direct from Veniards. Capes were in short supply and possession of a jungle cock cape proclaimed you a master. It was not eccentricity that caused Tony Biggs to stop off in the hlatini and harvest feathers off local birds. It was sheer bloody necessity.

My fly fishing and fly tying took a back seat after I left school. Adventure sports and a burning desire to climb the Eiger and surf a wave ski at Pipeline took over. I achieved the one but discovered that passion could not overcome my fear of heights or the fact that I am truly an awful climber. Fuck it works well when committing to a wave or marriage but as I learnt to my cost is bad news on a rock face. I did get to walk the Himalayas and try a big mountain in the Andes but that is another story. Thankfully some little voice and provenance persuaded me to avoid sky diving, flying or motor bikes. The death of an even crazier cousin on a wild river barred me from testing big rivers which is no doubt why I can write about the gentle art of fly tying today.

Anyway it was years later while holidaying in Rhodes and after a near death experience on a mountain bike that I was introduced to the joys of small stream fishing by Mario Geldenhuis. Shortly thereafter colleague and friend Raymond Meneses persuaded me to take up the vice again and introduced me to Durban Fly Tyers. Jay Smit, Stevie Brooks Laurence Davies Paul Leisegang and many others became friends and once again I was ensnared in the deadly thrall that is fly tying.

But oh boy had the world changed. Instead of the handful of vices that were available when I was a kid you could choose now chose from literally hundreds. And the material! At first I was determined that I would fish and tie as I had before. In way Canon Jarge Pennington and his grandson who ran the Michaelhouse trout club would have been proud. That is with the barest minimum of equipment and with flies tied in similar vein. Who was I kidding! I may have fished Highmore in midwinter standing chest deep in water wearing rugby shorts and a jersey as a youth but that was before waders.

The J Vice changed everything.

You have no idea what it means to change from a cheapili Veniards collet style vice that one had to tighten with a monkey wrench to a J Vice. I still get a thrill every time I sit down in front of this marvel such is the difference between then and now. And it opened new horizons. Things that were difficult before became easy.

And easier became easier still with all the new materials and threads. I cannot overemphasise the importance of decent thread in revolutionising fly tying. Using the right thread correctly is over 50% of getting fly tying right. A passion for proportion is about 40% and material and technique make up the remaining 10%. Granted you may see it differently and as you get better your perception of what is acceptable and consequently these percentages will change but trust me proportion and thread are next to everything in fly tying.

I must have gone through 20 different types of thread before I settled on my three workhorses. I use Gordon Griffith's Sheer 14/0 for most stuff, Uni Trico 17/0 when it gets small and Danville 70 denier for almost everything else. Sure I use a lot of other stuff but these are my basic go to threads and the foundation of my fly tying.

The other two foundational tools are a bobbin you like and a good pair of scissors. The J Bobbin does it for me or a C&F bobbin when I am spinning thread. I like the J Bobbin because of its weight, the fact you can adjust thread tension and for its angled head makes for a comfortable angle of attack. I like the better Slick and Semperfly scissors though Gordon has recently introduced me to his Japanese scissors which are fantastic.

And then there is technique and proportion. There were no clubs when I started so I depended on Sherman and the Veniards guide for advice. This was great but though Sherman is great man and one of my heroes, it pales into comparison with what is available today. I love books so have amassed a large but by no means complete library. Books are my solace, my pride and joy but in truth they are unnecessary. Join a fly tying club; find Davie McPhail on You Tube and take some lessons from Gordon Van Der Spuy and you will quickly learn what used to take our grandfathers a life time to master.

I will never forget the first time I met Gordon. He had promoted a fly tying competition through the Flyfishing Magazine and came down to Durban to give some lessons as part of the whole deal. I hosted him as fly fishers are wont to do, lost no time in inspecting his fly box. Now I thought I was pretty good. But to use Gordon's language; "I was kak Bru. Seriously!" His flies were things of beauty. Art had transcended function.

Lesser mortals like most of us realise that Gordon is an artist and as such lives in a different world to the artisanal space occupied by most competent fly tyers. But artists especially ones with the communication skills of a trained actor like Gordon have much to teach artisans about the business of fly tying. I now have been on two courses run by Gordon. On the first I learned more in 2 days than I had learnt in 40 years and on the second my tying improved by 50%. The extraordinary thing is that Gordon does not just teach you stuff; he empowers you to unlock your own potential. And this is not just my impression. Dr Steven Brooks, scientist arch empiricist and fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry, will tell you the same. So will artist fly fishing philanthropist and all round great gal Sharland Urquart. Hell even Ed Herbst is impressed. Gordon truly changed and is changing my skills and enhancing the pleasure I experience as a fly tyer.

And so we get eventually to what I really love about this whole thing about fly fishing and fly tying. Yes the tug is the drug as Roxanne Stegen explained to me not so long ago. But as you will have gathered the real drug is the people of fly fishing and their passion and ideas and the friendships you make. Being part of a community that enjoy what they are doing is a special thing that I fear is under appreciated in this world of instant gratification.

It is strange, therefore, that the electronic media that has birthed this narcissistic world of me, my space, my world, is also the foundation of the resurgence of fly tying internationally. So I think it isn't the medium that is the problem but what people make of it. I think the fly tying community is doing just great in this regard. As I see it when fly tyers share their latest attempt online, it is to communicate with a community of likeminded souls, to get feedback from friends and to share rather than to puff ones consequence. The fun of being out there in cyberspace is the realisation that there is always someone who has something to teach you. All you have to do is participate.

We are truly fortunate.
