

Creative Solutions

By Tom Keer



80 Years:



From 1929 to today, Winston has based its business on designing and building quality fly rods for specific angling situations.

One of my favorite places to fish the Atlantic Ocean is at a T-shaped sandbar that connects to the beach. These types of bars are uncommon, and when you find one it's money in the bank for striped bass. My bar remained wholly mine for five years, and every time I went there the fishing was what dreams are made of.

One time, around 10 p.m. on a full moon night, I went to the bar and saw a man already there. He was fighting a fish. I sat on the beach and watched him until he and the fish were exhausted. He was a savvy angler.

We met when he walked his fish to shore. I handed him my 30-pound Boga Grip, and the fish bottomed it out.

"That's an honest to goodness 40-pounder," I said.

"I think you're right," he answered. "What a great fish."

"What fly did you use?"

"A Kenny Abrames Razzle Dazzle," he said. "The best big fish fly there is."

I checked his gear from head to toe and studied his rod. He was fishing a Winston B-II MX.

"You're fishing a Winston?" I asked.

"That's all I fish," he said.

"I like their freshwater rods, but I've never cast their saltwater sticks," I admitted.

He handed the rod to me. "Be my guest. There's a pod of big fish on the left."

I wonder what the company's founders would've thought of their rods beaching trophy striped bass at night on a remote beach a far coast away, nearly eight decades after they turned heads during their California debut.

"More than a rod, it's a reward" is a slogan Winston has used throughout its long history. A reward that brings more rewards in the fish we catch.

Today, the fly-rod company founded by Lew Stoner and rod-building partner Robert Winther, in the early 20th Century in San Francisco, continues to keep its reward-return promise to fly-fishers.

"The business climate during our 80th birthday is oddly similar to when Robert Winther and Lou Stoner founded the

company," said Winston President/CEO Woody Woodard. "Winston was launched in 1929 and grew during the Great Depression. As economists and businessmen know, discretionary purchases dwindle during recessions as customers focus on value. Because our history is rooted in expanding during difficult economic times we can remain singularly focused on building and developing the very best fly rods in the industry."

"Everyone at Winston focuses on two core principals," said Annette McLean, one of the leaders of Winston's Design Team and a 24-year employee. "A Winston is not just a fly rod. It is a commitment to doing something the right way, without compromise. We work creatively to find solutions to fishing situations, and then we translate those discoveries into the construction of excellent fly rods. The original Winston cane rods were very different from most bamboo rods of the day, and that pioneering spirit lives on today."

"We are a small niche company that only makes fly rods. As a result, we don't have an enormous marketing budget," said Woodard. "What we do have is an unparalleled focus on designing the best fly rods possible for every fishing situation and every casting style."

McLean agrees. "The first and most important question we ask during the R & D process is 'What is this rod's job?' Should it precisely deliver a shrimp pattern at 80 feet or delicately place a size 22 Trico under a tree limb at 20 feet? The answer to that question is developed through the building of countless numbers of prototypes. We employ the user-designer approach and seek the input

from many fishermen. These prototypes go into the field to our sales reps, pro staff, fly-shop owners and guides who we know from experience can offer constructive comments. We'll experiment with modifications until we come up with a rod that will offer our customers the best solution that we can develop for their fishing situations. As a result, we are surrounded by a lot of good people who help keep us on track.

"Our rods are launched when they're ready. We don't work off a pre-determined marketing time line because sometimes it just takes longer than we expected to perfect

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the designs,” McLean continues. “So when our rods make their way on to streams, rivers, ponds, estuaries, flats and reefs, we hope that they bring an escape to another time and place that which is more simple and considered time well spent. Perhaps that experience is ‘the Winston feel’ that everyone talks about?”

Richard Farino of Urban Angler/Arlington and Urban Angler Delivered (the company’s catalog) is a long-time Winston fan. “I like Winston’s crisp, responsive actions, their outstanding craftsmanship and impeccable attention to detail. As if casting a Winston isn’t pleasurable enough, their rods come alive when you hook a fish. I can feel each and every move a fish makes, which might help describe the ‘Winston feel.’ You owe it to yourself to cast a saltwater rod. They cast far, they fish well and I love my B-II MX for striped bass, false albacore, bonefish and tarpon. On the business side, we have two retail stores, a catalog and an e-commerce site, and they are a pleasure to work with. Customer service is results-oriented, and inventory is always in stock. The last time I was in Twin Bridges I toured the factory and was impressed by their rod-building facility. And Twin Bridges has to be one of the best places for field-testing.”

During her two decades at Winston, Leslie Clark in the marketing department has been asked one constant question: where is Mister Winston? “Certainly not in Twin Bridges (the company’s headquarters),” says Clark, laughing. “The company’s name is a combination of

the surnames of its two founders, Robert Winther and Lew Stoner. Winther was a machinist by trade and Stoner was an inventor. Interestingly, two of Stoner’s creations were the electric toothbrush and the process of hollow fluting. Based in San Francisco, the two men worked well together, with Stoner creating the rod vision and Winther bringing it to fruition.

“One of their objectives was to create a rod to suit the tournament style of casting at the Golden Gate Casting Club,” Clark said. “That meant they would need to first create machinery that would then let them experiment with new manufacturing techniques and new materials. Their objective was to create a rod that would outperform all other available rod brands. This blend of cutting edge technology and manufacturing resulting in unparalleled fishing performance is the company’s Brand DNA, and holds as true today

as it did when the company was founded. During the late 1920s, the cane rods that were made were solid. Stoner incorporated a hollow-fluted design into his blanks, which increased performance while reducing the overall weight. This was an innovative design that revolutionized cane-rod design, and was patented by Winston.”

“Winston has occupied a unique position for quite a long time,” says Dave McCoy, of Emerald Water Anglers, a fly shop in Seattle, Washington. “When it comes to building rods, they take their time and wait until the rod is just right before introducing it to the market. The result is a rod that withstands the test of time. When you buy a Winston, you’re buying into a fly-fishing legacy.”

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Winston heritage: Lew Stoner (far left) and Robert Winther combined their names to create the Winston brand; Doug Merrick (near left) owned the company in the 1950s; David Ondaatje (below) is the owner today.



The company changed ownership several times through the decades. Red Loskot bought Winther's interest in the company in 1933 and was Stoner's partner for 20 years. In 1957, Lew Stoner suddenly died, leaving Doug Merrick as the sole owner of the company. In


1973, Merrick sold Winston to Tom Morgan, who moved manufacturing and distribution from San Francisco to Twin Bridges, Montana. In 1991, David Ondaatje bought Winston from Morgan and said, "It's been my goal to run the company in a manner in which Tom would be proud." And so the legacy continues.

"One part of the company's history that seems to get overlooked is the significant contributions that owner David Ondaatje has brought to Winston," says Woodard. "David has owned the company for 18 years, which is the longest time that one person has owned 100 percent of Winston. During that time, the company built a new composite-rod manufacturing facility with the capability to build rod blanks, allowing the company to push rod technology and introduce more than 15 new rod series. In addition, he increased distribution worldwide and focused on superior quality, performance and customer service. Our objective here is to offer uncompromising quality combined with unparalleled performance."

Conservation is an integral part of the company. Every year Winston picks specific projects that improve the fisheries anglers love. Winston has supported TU for many decades. As an example, every rod is shipped with a free, one year Trout Unlimited membership, and rods are provided to TU for fundraisers. This year is a combined birthday party, which also celebrates Trout Unlimited's 50th Anniversary (and this magazine's 30th).

Further, Winston has partnered with noted artist and FR&R Contributing Editor James Prosek to create a limited-edition conservation series of rods and a corresponding Prosek print. Winston is donating 20 percent from every one of these rods sold to a conservation project of a buyer's choice. They are also donating two marquee rods, numbers 50 and 100, to Trout Unlimited to use for fundraising.

"The Winston Feel" is also celebrated through its film festival. Professionals and amateurs can compete in several different genres. Check out the recently named winners on the company's Web site, www.winstonrods.com.

So happy birthday to the Winston gang. Next stop, the century mark. 

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