

Business Profile

«INSIDE THE R. L. WINSTON FLY-ROD SHOP»

A Feel for Rod-Building

By Tom Keer

Tucked in the Ruby Valley between the Tobacco Root, Highland and Pioneer mountain ranges is the town of Twin Bridges, Montana. Lewis and Clark traveled through this valley; later, a small number of trappers tramped the game trails between the ranges. Cattle ranchers who were then joined by sheep farmers eventually pushed out the trappers. In the 1860s, neighboring Virginia City attracted prospectors who learned that the hills were loaded with gold and silver. Allegedly there still are ghosts in the ghost towns. Nowadays, life in the 400-person town of Twin Bridges is slow-paced. As visitors arrive, odds are they are coming to fish the Jefferson, Ruby, Beaverhead or Big Hole—and they often stop by the R.L. Winston Rod Company.

Everyone at Winston not only fishes, but they also bring a variety of creative interests to the company. When he's not developing rods, Owner/Chairman David Ondaatje is a filmmaker and photographer and is passionately involved in product field-testing. Away from engagement in rod design and overseeing company performance, CEO Woody Woodard takes his daily walk along the Beaverhead, downhill skis in the winter and plays tennis with his wife in the summer. Chief Rod Designer Annette McLean hikes in the mountains with her husband; she's also a little bit of a local celebrity as she sits on the Twin Bridges Town Council. Gayle Begin, materials manager, loves to garden and play with her grandchildren.

“Winston rods have always had a certain ‘feel,’ which made me a fan. Originally it was because the rods had a softer action than others, but now, even with the faster action Boron rods, that sensitivity is still there. That sense of feeling is an invaluable teaching tool and, as an angler, adds greatly to my fishing enjoyment.”

—Joan Wulff

Customer-service manager Kevin Turman is a passionate angler and also a pastor of a local church. Leslie Clark in marketing raises sorrel and white paint Belgian draft horses; she and her husband drove their teams in the Oklahoma Land Race scene in the Tom Cruise/Nicole Kidman movie *Far and Away*. Production Manager Joe Begin fluctuates between one of his two immaculately maintained motorcycles. Cindy Giem, in accounting, spends her spare time working with her family on their purebred Angus ranch south of town.

The diverse people who design the rods that so many anglers love have a number of distinct similarities. First, they're process-oriented. Whether they navigate the straits of town politics or research equine genetics, their method of thinking bodes perfectly for

engineering fly rods. They push boundaries through research and experimentation. Their aptitudes toward constant improvement are no more apparent than in the culmination of the new Winston Boron rods.

The Boron Way: While many rod companies have experimented with boron, only Winston stayed with the material long enough to figure out how to make it work in fly rods. Boron's strength-to-weight ratios are outstanding, but with the strength came a brittleness as well as a stiffness. With



a tremendous amount of time and creative work, the company mastered the material and the Winston Boron rod series was born.

"Our dealers, advisors and pro staff provided an invaluable amount of insight into the material modifications," says McLean. "Their outstanding feedback was utilized in the prototypes that we built. On several occasions, we thought we were close, and some parts of those earlier samples were correct. We found that some of those early models would cast great but they'd only fish okay. Others would cast okay but they'd fish great. With insightful comments and detailed feedback from our dealers and pro staff, we were able to develop superb casting and fishing rods. Without their input we probably would have needed a far longer time to bring a completed rod to the marketplace. As our dealers and pro staff spend a great deal of time on the water, their input is important. And we're very careful to listen."

Creativity is at the heart of Winston rod design. "Good rod design is a multi-step collaborative process and we've always worked with very specific design and performance objec-

has always been smooth, progressive and a delight to cast. Granted we have some variations within this overall design paradigm, but in general, it's an easy action for beginners and it's a great rod for experts," Woodard says.

Throughout its 81-year history, Winston has

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always chased performance...at the right pace. "All companies wrestle with the concept of time," says Leslie Clark. "In an ideal world, rods would move along in a standard process, and new models would be ready for the marketplace just as customers have outgrown their favorites. Some companies work off of a particular time line, and that approach satisfies the business demands, particularly on the accounts-receivable side. But the best way to build a great fly rod is to subject all designs and manufacturing techniques to time. We bring our rods to the table when they

as to supply us with the highest quality and construction of cork grips available. Our reel seats are designed to our precise specifications as well. When the raw materials arrive at our shop, each is assembled, inspected and machined or buffed as necessary. I love my job, and my job is mak-

ing outstanding rods for our customers to enjoy while fishing. What's better than that?"

David Ondaatje ensures that pillars of quality and excellence behind the Winston brand are upheld throughout the process. "We push boundaries. True leadership is defining what you want and designing to that goal rather than simply going whichever direction the wind blows. We have help, of course, but knowing where we're going has always been important to our success.

tives rather than catering to any market trend," said CEO Woody Woodard. "We are always on the lookout for new materials. A lot of new materials recently have come out of military applications and technology. Think about the nano-technology that enjoyed a brief lifespan. Or thermoplastic resins. Or ceramic. Those technologies had a very short shelf life, and no one hears about them much any more. Whenever we're presented with new technologies, we review them with all touch points in our process to see how they fit into our specific design objectives. By working through the process as a group we work as a true team, one that has a built in mechanism of checks and balances. We look for technologies that have sustainability and, though it has involved a little extra investment and design time, boron continues to fit the bill perfectly. Our process is simple—it's driven by our tireless focus on creating the best casting and fishing fly rods possible.

"Our customers, which means our dealers, guides and fishermen, help to determine the expectations of our rods. The Winston action

are ready. When they are better than any other rod out there, including many of our own, after all the bugs are ironed out, then we'll sell them. Many times we have to resist the urge to rush them, but in the end, patience always wins out."

"On the manufacturing side, we take our time, as well," says Joe Begin. "We make sure all patterns are cut perfectly, and always look at our process to determine how we can do it better, not faster. Our finish is a perfect example. We went through a number of processes over a few years to perfect our unique Winston green color. And then when we got the color right, we shifted our focus on the finish, making it as durable and as beautiful as possible. There has been no need to change blank colors for marketing reasons. All of our customers love our finish just as it is. Our green finish is part of the Winston brand, our mark of quality.

"All wrappers wind by hand for quality purposes and accuracy," Begin continues. "Our cork originally was hand-pounded and then turned, and recently we worked with our supplier who willingly redesigned their process so

"As a steward of the Winston brand, I focus on several company cornerstones. Excellence of our product across all fronts, from design to manufacturing to distribution. Satisfaction. Regardless of one's passion and pastime, nothing makes for a more satisfying experience than having proper equipment that enables one to thoroughly enjoy all of the diverse parts of the activity. Innovation. The purpose of innovation is to expand and enhance. We push boundaries. Alfred, Lord Tennyson said it best: 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.' When we hit a consensus among our internal design team, dealers and guides, we then push hard to tweak and modify. The beauty and esthetic found in Winston products offers transcendence in fishing. We build rods that offer a higher level of enjoyment.

"It takes more time, it costs more and it certainly takes more patience. We don't look at a right or a wrong way to make a product. We just make it the Winston way," Ondaatje sums up. ■

