The Wizard of Rods

KEN WHITING'S FERTILE MIND IS CHANGING THE WAY WE FISH

FIRST HE WAS AN INTERNATIONALLY competitive builder and flier of model airplanes. After he graduated from college with a degree in psychology, he got into the construction business. He bred tropical fish after that, then wound up competing on the professional bowling tour. He owned a bowling alley, too, and invented a new type of bowling ball that for a few years was state of the art and a commercial success. Those experiments took him into both golf-club design and industrial consulting.

Now he builds radically designed, high-performance fishing rods that fish as well as they look. For Ken Whiting, 65, of Las Vegas, Nev., that makes as much sense as anything else he's done.

Whiting's Airrus spinning and baitcasting rods have become perennial winners at ICAST, the fishing industry's annual trade-show extravaganza, taking the show's new-rod award category in three of the past four years. Judging is based on the level of innovation, execution, workmanship, and practicality. All the major rod makers attend the show, of course, which means Whiting's upstart company has consistently beaten the biggies. Curious, I traveled to Las Vegas to check out the man and his rods.

THE MAD SCIENTIST

"Don't expect some big, fancy rod shop," Whiting told me, laughing, as we drove from the airport into the Las Vegas suburbs. Airrus rods are manufactured in China and warehoused in Texas, but the most important part—coming up with the concepts—happens in a bay of Whiting's two-car garage.

Walking inside, I saw a desk, an array of cardboard boxes packed with rod parts and papers, numerous vials and bottles containing mysterious concoctions, a small workbench with a few simple power tools, and a telephone. "Airrus world headquarters," Whiting said, grinning wickedly.

It's tempting to describe him as a wacky inventor, and with his prominent ears, thin face, and 1950s-vintage flattop haircut, he does look a tad geeky. But he is neither mad nor chaotic. He's just an extraordinarily clever guy.

Late one night in the 1980s, for example, he was pondering the difficulty of molding urethane plastic around a new kind of bowling-ball core. When the pizza delivery came, Whiting noted that the pies in the box were separated by three-legged plastic gizmos. Those shapes gave him the idea for a manufacturing process that eventually made his new bowling ball possible.

His work with fishing rods started in a similar fashion. During the 1990s, he was employed as a consultant for a sporting-goods manufacturer. Whiting figured that golf-club shafts made of strong, tapered titanium metal tubing might make good fishing rod butts. He glued some metal butt sections to conventional graphite rod tips and soon came up with a new design, which Lamiglas eventually manufactured.

By 2002 he'd started the Sirrus rod brand, though he soon changed the name to Airrus due to a trademark conflict. The name Airrus, he explained, "has no meaning to me as a word, but it did get us to the top of every alphabetical product listing. That's a good thing." That same year, he won his first ICAST award for a new design that may change the way many rods are made.

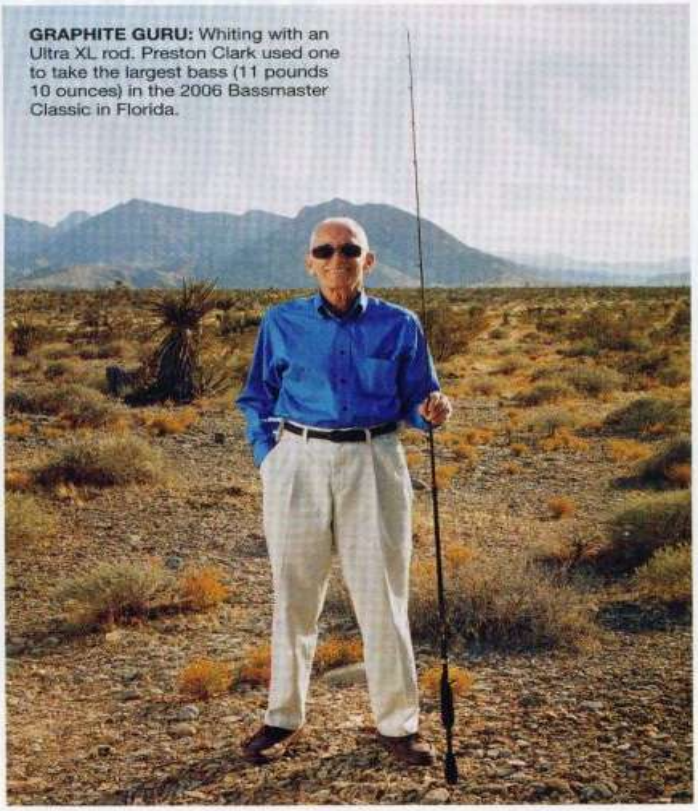
OUTSIDE THE BOX

Most tackle companies, Whiting told me, are all making more or less the same look-alike rods by using the same methods. "It just seems like they can't think outside the box, but there's really no reason why things can't be different."

Conventional graphite rods are made by wrapping a flat, triangular sheet of graphite fibers in an epoxy matrix around a tapered steel mandrel. The assembly is then heat-cured. A stiff-spined tubular rod blank is the result when the mandrel is removed.

Whiting's 2002 innovation, the Co-Matrix 457 model, is very different. Instead of a butt that's sheet-wrapped, his rod's lower portion is wound with filament. In this process, graphite filaments pass through an epoxy bath and are then wound like thread onto a spinning mandrel. Varying the weave pattern alters the flex and strength of the blank. The resulting blank is strong, light, and—unlike sheet-wrapped rods—uniformly stiff in all directions. Without a rigid spine, which can torque a rod slightly to the left or right while you are trying to cast straight ahead, your casts will be more accurate.

These butts are then glued to sheet-wrapped rod tips that (so



GRAPHITE GURU: Whiting with an Ultra XL rod. Preston Clark used one to take the largest bass (11 pounds 10 ounces) in the 2006 Bassmaster Classic in Florida.

PHOTOGRAPH BY J.P. GREENWOOD

far) can't be filament wound because of their small diameter.

For 2003 and his second award winner, Whiting added Spectra fiber to the filament winding mix. This is the same spun polyethylene fiber from which so-called superlines are made. Past experiments with embedding Spectra in epoxy had failed until Whiting found a way to surface-treat it so it could bond to the epoxy resin. Adding Spectra to the graphite mix, he said, reduces secondary vibrations during casting and thus smooths out the performance.

He took yet another big step—and won a third ICAST award—in 2004. Working with his Tradition rods, he enlarged the rearmost portion of the filament-winding mandrel, making the butt and grip sections as one piece. There's no cork or other handle beyond the expanded rod blank itself, so it's easier to feel nibbling fish. Adding an extendable fly-reel seat, he also created a fly-spin version. Polished to a factory finish, the filament-wound butt and grip look like richly grained tropical wood.

Lately, he's been building rods based on carbon nanotubes, which are microscopic aggregations of carbon atoms in tubular shapes. Mixed with epoxy resins, the tiny nanotubes act like the metal-reinforcing rods in poured concrete, strengthening and lightening the entire rod structure. This series is called N-Sync.

I wondered about naming a rod after a boy band. "Why not?" Whiting laughed. "If Justin Timberlake sues me, I'll get lots of publicity."

Get Some Airrus

GIVEN THE NEW TECHNOLOGY involved, Whiting's prices are reasonable, ranging from $65 for the IM6 graphite-based Centurions to $140 for Tradition spinning models. The high-end N-Sync rods go for about $250. Check rodsby airrus.com for product availability, pricing, and a dealer list. He also takes direct orders at 702-395-2173. —J.M.

TRADITION RODS: The filament-wound butt resembles rich tropical wood, and no cork translates into a greater sense of feel.