

Rod Rage



Matt Daniel with masked-up rods at Cooma.

Most fly-fishers are dead boring. We talk in hushed tones about secret flies and waffle endlessly about recent captures, new gadgets and dead animal parts. Talking about our latest exploits amidst a non-fishing crowd can leave us fully wall-flowered in seconds.

But when the conversation turns to fly rods, like politics, things can get very interesting very quickly, and can even turn nasty. Quiet tweedy types suddenly burst out with more passion than Big Kev when describing the virtues of their favourite rod. Brand allegiances, like membership of the Liberal Party, are passed down from generation to generation.

David Anderson puts more than thirty 6-weight rods to the test.

ANARCHY

In the on-line world, fly-fishing forum threads can go from semi-stagnant dribble to World War III in less time than it takes parliament to pass themselves a pay rise. To challenge someone's opinion about a particular brand of rod is like questioning their parentage. In one corner you have all the hype about budget rods being just as good as their expensive counterparts for a quarter of the price, and in the other corner you have the big brand snobs arguing that cheap rods are inferior and so are their owners. It's the keyboard casters who never go fishing versus the fly fishing gurus and tackle shop boys with brand endorsements and the caps to prove it. Then there are the tackle junkies who just need a fix, and the crusty know it all's who are still living in the Dark Ages. And so the debate rages with all the subtlety, manners and grace that you might expect from a room full of pre schoolers. It would only be interesting if you gave us all guns.

It was in the middle of one of these fascinating on-line rod rage exchanges not so long ago that the (possibly stupid) idea of asking the fly fishing public what THEY actually think of all these rods was born.

What would be the outcome if you removed all the vested interests and asked the end users to try a bunch of rods and keep score?

Anarchy perhaps?

6-WEIGHTS RULE

The 9 ft 6-weight category was chosen for this experiment because it's the middle of the road, the most common selling weight in Australia and the place that a lot of us started with our first rod.

The modern 6-weight must fill a lot of roles from stream work to flogging the big lakes and even a bit of light salt water. There's also a hell of a lot of them on the market—the advent of cheaper rods from Asia has seen the number of types available go from less than ten a few years ago to well over 50 if you include everything available on-line.

To minimise bias due to brand loyalties and associated propaganda a decision was made to disguise the rods by taping over the logos. It had to be a 'blind test' with the casters unaware of the rod model or price. Every rod would have to stand on its merits, not rest on its logo.

After a few quick calls to the rod importers explaining the plan, I soon had 33 mostly 4-piece 6-weights (and one 8-weight?) at my house ready to be put to the test.

CONSPIRACY THEORY

From my first postings on the on-line forums about doing a big rod review the virtual doubters loaded their guns and lined up to question the integrity of the process. Not since the Pope popped Kennedy has conspiracy theory run so wild.

With what little remained of my credibility on the line, my strategy was to drag others down with me and so a call went out for help. The idea was to keep the process as transparent as possible.

With Andrew 'Wet' Connell, Gordon Low and Tom Boylan as its backbone we formed a committee made up of 21 members of the fly fishing world. Included were representatives from the tackle wholesale and retail sectors, sponsored fishing guides, club



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representatives and a guru or two for good measure. In the interests of fairness, every rod supplier was represented on the committee.

First we had to organise venues where the rods could be cast and these were eventually set up in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Cooma, Millbrook Lakes and Melbourne. Local clubs and fly shops ran the events, which were attended by several local members of the committee.

CALLING ALL CASTERS

Next the call for casters went out, and the committee decided that, in order to judge the often-subtle differences between rods, the testers should have the ability to double haul and cast 70+ feet of line. It was also stipulated that those involved would have no connection with the tackle industry. More than 70 casters volunteered, and from what I saw most ranged

from good to brilliant casters.

The last function of the committee, and it was the hardest, was to establish a scoring system. Many were put forward but in the end Chris Beech's simple and easy to understand 0 to 20 system over five categories was accepted and the vote sheets printed.

The categories were build quality, short casts, long casts, loop control and feel: all of equal importance in the final tally. The casters were asked to determine what they thought constituted a short or long cast and award points accordingly. 'Feel' was defined as an overall desire to own and ultimately fish with the rod.

There were some differences in the way the events were run, in that Melbourne, Millbrook and Sydney were cast over water and the rest on grass; the Queensland scores may also have been affected by the event being run on the lawn of a pub.

All rods were teamed with an identical Scientific Anglers weight-forward GPX #6 line and Gillies Guide Series reel, and casters were given around 5 minutes to play with each rod and record their scores.

CHECK YOUR WARRANTY

The events were run through the winter months and went without a hitch; except that someone (you know who you are!) stepped on the new Redington SS before it was ever cast. As it was the only one in the country it couldn't be replaced in time to be included in the trials.

This is a reminder to explore warranty options if you are a klutz, and ask about the availability of replacement parts.

The only other hiccup was when two rods became mixed up early in the Canberra event. I was watching one of the better casters throw beautiful 100-footers one after the other when he pointed out that the top section of the rod didn't match the bottom. It was the Scott V2 tip on the Blackridge butt section. There might be an opportunity there for the rod designers of the future as it cast like a cannon.

Rod Rage... continued



Testing the rods on the Canberra grass with score sheets at the ready.

DAMN LIES & STATISTICS

At the conclusion of the six events I received 71 voting sheets covered top to bottom in 0–20 scores assigned to 32 secret rod ID numbers. This was a major headache for me because I am more goof-off than genius and have no head for numbers. So, cap in hand, I asked Melbourne's computer guru Dale McCabe of McCabe Solutions to tabulate the results and present them in a meaningful way.

Because of the amount of data entry involved, and the fear of reprisals, we then had the numbers independently audited to check for keying errors.

At this stage, with rod brands still hidden behind ID numbers, the editor of *FlyLife* was presented with the data. He immediately panicked and commissioned an independent consultants report to test the validity of the statistics. Warwick Powell and his team at Transpac Consulting answered the call

and did the final number crunching while the editor was having a good lie down.

AND THE WINNER IS

Table 1 shows the mean scores derived for each rod in each of the five categories. An overall rating (out of 20) for each rod was established by calculating the 'mean of the means' and the rods are listed in descending order.

Although it is tempting to award prizes, comparing minor score differences in the accompanying table of results should be avoided because they may not, in Geek speak, be 'statistically significant'.

Given the relative closeness of the vast majority of rods in terms of overall mean ratings, the best way for a reader to make use of the table is to consider the specific attributes (price, quality, distance etc) that they may be seeking from a rod in order to best gauge its relative merits. If you only have 500 bucks to spend, I guess you ignore ratings for more expensive fly rods.

NO BAD RODS

The main conclusion is that all rods performed well. If all of my scores at school had been between 13/20 and 17/20 I wouldn't have been a photographer! So, according to our 71 casters, there were no bad rods.

At the top of the scale, 7 rods were rated 16/20 or above, and all of these must be regarded as exceptionally good rods. This pool, perhaps not surprisingly, was dominated by leading brands Sage and Loomis. Having nine rods in the top ten, they clearly lead the high end of the market because their rods appeal to a wide range of people. And kudos as well to the New Zealand made Composite Developments XLS for being up there with the best.

STATE OF THE ART

Although the results for individual venues may be less statistically reliable (whatever that means) and are not presented in this article, I did notice that the Victorian scores closely followed the national totals with the exception of the CD XLS being top five at the Melbourne event and the Redington CPS hitting #4 at Millbrook Lakes. The Canberra crowd was almost 100% troutie, which makes it surprising that Sage's saltwater hero the Xi2, came in at #4. On the grass

outside the Alpine Angler the Cooma casters battled a biting cold wind and took a shine to the very powerful Scott S3, putting it in at #5. Sydney differed from the national average by giving TFO its best event result with two rods in the top five. Queensland voted speed before finesse with the Cross Current and TCR finishing 1–2, not a surprise really seeing they're all saltwater guys and need the power out on the water.

The fact that scores for any particular rod varied quite widely between participants, and in some cases between testing venues, is indicative of the fact that we all have different levels of skill, are accustomed to particular rods, and fish in different environments and circumstances.

The lesson here is obvious: in choosing a rod you should cast as many as you can and find one that suits you best.

MATCHING LINES

In conducting this review we ran the same line through all rods—the top-selling SA weight-forward GPX (General Presentation Taper). It is a brilliant all rounder that suits most rods. As the blurb says, this line is made half a size heavier to more fully load fast-action graphite rods. But it is a fact of life that not all fly-line tapers suit all rods. Using the same line seemed the fairest approach but some rods may not have performed at their best using this line.

Curious as to why the Winston was parked near the bottom of the list despite its big reputation as a sweet trout rod, I tried it myself and found that it seemed far better suited to a less aggressive line like SA's XPS. Other rods, including some of the

AND DON'T FORGET, IF YOU ARE STRAPPED FOR CASH,
IMPROVING YOUR CASTING IS A MORE SENSIBLE IDEA
THAN SPENDING UP ON A 'BETTER' ROD.

ROD (Click name to view website)	BUILD QUALITY	SHORT CASTS	LONG CASTS	LOOP CONTROL	FEEL	FINAL SCORE	ROD PRICE
Sage SLT	16.75	17.18	16.32	16.76	17.01	16.81	\$995.00
Loomis StreamDance GLX–HLS	16.61	16.94	16.56	16.65	16.83	16.72	\$1,098.00
Loomis StreamDance GLX–MLS	16.31	16.21	16.76	16.59	16.69	16.51	\$1,098.00
Sage Z-Axis	16.01	16.38	16.01	16.31	16.32	16.21	\$1,095.00
Loomis StreamDance Metolius HLS	15.94	16.30	16.11	16.11	16.15	16.12	\$672.00
Sage TCR	15.62	15.46	16.66	16.31	15.99	16.01	\$1,185.00
CD-Rods XLS	15.30	15.69	16.44	16.30	16.30	16.00	\$799.95
Loomis Cross Current GLX	15.80	15.80	16.38	15.90	15.63	15.90	\$1,063.00
Sage Fli	15.24	16.06	15.92	15.75	15.69	15.73	\$520.00
Sage Xi2	15.34	15.35	16.31	15.73	15.30	15.61	\$1,095.00
Redington CPS	14.93	15.62	16.28	15.69	15.45	15.59	\$600.00
Sage Launch	15.07	15.92	15.39	15.41	15.49	15.46	\$345.00
Stalker Guide Series	15.23	15.79	15.54	15.27	15.21	15.41	\$699.95
CD-Rods ICT	14.54	15.59	15.62	15.28	15.38	15.28	\$599.95
Scott S3	14.77	15.72	15.18	15.37	15.38	15.28	\$1,195.00
Innovator Velocity	14.82	15.37	15.61	15.39	15.11	15.26	\$429.00
Scott E2	14.39	15.48	15.39	15.44	15.55	15.25	\$760.00
Scott X2s	15.13	15.01	15.45	15.03	14.93	15.11	\$895.00
TFO TiCr	14.23	14.94	15.41	15.07	15.39	15.01	\$425.00
TFO Lefty Kreh Professional	14.01	15.17	15.42	15.24	14.96	14.96	\$275.00
Redington Red.Fly2	14.66	15.28	15.11	14.94	14.80	14.96	\$395.00
Stalker Salt Series	15.30	14.58	15.44	14.87	14.39	14.92	\$599.00
Redington RS3	14.31	15.34	15.08	15.10	14.59	14.88	\$475.00
TFO TiCrX	14.10	14.77	15.45	15.10	14.70	14.83	\$425.00
TFO Jim Teeny	14.17	14.82	15.20	14.90	14.63	14.74	\$375.00
Winston Boron IIx	16.18	15.24	14.03	13.69	14.38	14.70	\$1,149.00
Sage VT2	13.49	15.10	14.90	14.87	14.42	14.56	\$775.00
Jarvis Walker Blackridge (2pc)	13.27	14.94	14.83	14.87	14.21	14.43	\$149.00
Stalker Legend Series III	13.37	14.87	14.96	14.54	14.30	14.41	\$249.95
Stalker Master Series III	13.62	14.63	14.80	14.38	14.35	14.36	\$399.00
Scott V2 (2pc)	14.21	14.76	14.52	14.37	13.96	14.36	\$360.00
Innovator Distance	11.66	13.51	14.73	13.87	13.13	13.38	\$149.00

Table 1: Mean ratings for each rod tested for the categories of build quality, short casts, long casts, loop control and feel. The final score (out of 20) represents the mean of the five categories. All rods 4-piece unless specified.

Rod Rage... continued



One of the Sydney rod-test participants going for distance.

budget model cannons like the Innovator Distance, might have suited the mostly troutie judges better by being lined up with a weight-forward #7 line.

RETAIL THERAPY

Also shown in the Table are the recommended retail prices for each of the rods at the time of the review. Be aware that these prices may vary and should be confirmed independently if you are shopping for a rod. Some stated prices might hopefully fall as a result of a higher Australian dollar.

The data crunchers were asked to explore the relationship between price and performance ratings, and the results are presented in graph form. The scatter plot clearly points to the existence of a positive relationship between overall performance and RRP. That is, generally speaking, you 'get what you pay for'.

Readers might be surprised that the difference between some \$400 and \$1100 rods in terms of performance in this blind test was less than 10% (2/20). A change of fly line or just a few days on the water to get the best out of a rod might reduce this gap even further. This probably says a lot about modern standards of fly rod production, and brand-driven pricing.

For the extra money, though, you do end up with a marginally better product and get to feel a whole lot

better about yourself. For fun, we extrapolated this line and determined that the perfect 20/20 rod will set you back \$3,700!

VALUE FOR MONEY

Only you can determine value for money, based on your budget and how high a priority you put on buying a fly rod. However, in terms of convenient price points the rods can be divided more or less equally into those priced over \$900, those between \$500 and \$900, and those less than \$500.

On this basis the first three rods in the top price bracket were the Sage SLT and the Loomis StreamDance GLX-HLS and -MLS models. The top three mid-price rods were the Loomis StreamDance Metolius HLS, CD XLS

and the Sage FLi. The top three rods under \$500 were the Sage Launch, Innovator Velocity and TFO TiCr.

Overall, in the top ten finishers there are three rods that stand out as great value for money: the Loomis StreamDance Metolius HLS (\$672), the Composite Developments XLS (\$800) and the Sage FLi (\$520). All three rated well against very expensive company.

ROD FIGHT CLUB

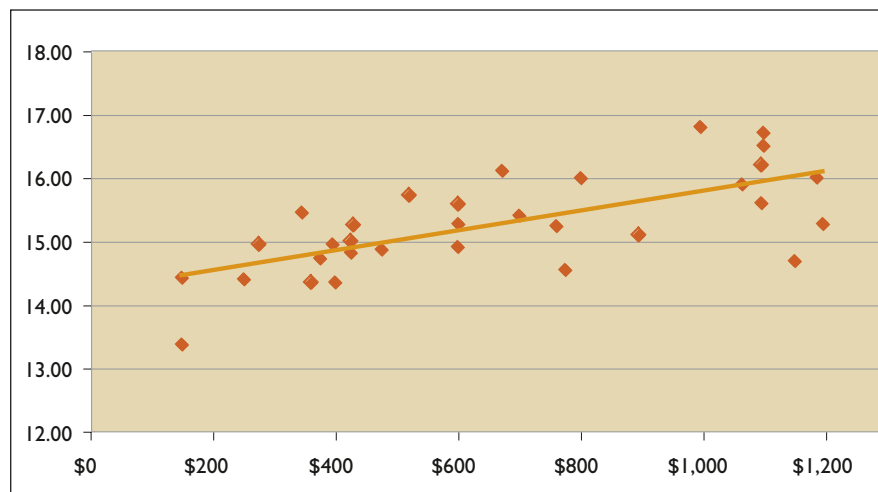
Before we start fighting on-line about these results, I would like to repeat that all the rods performed remarkably well and were hard to separate when the brands and prices were disguised. Overall, however, the cream did rise to the top.

Only ten years ago a budget rod was little better than a noodle with a reel seat, and only the top-shelf stuff was really worth using. Nowadays it seems we are spoiled for choice and there are some good rods available to suit any budget. And don't forget, if you are strapped for cash, improving your casting is a more sensible idea than spending up on a 'better' rod.

That said, if you have the money and can cast well enough to get the most out of them, the top-shelf rods are just plain awesome.

In the end we have to face the fact that it is impossible for anyone—fly fishing guru, keyboard caster, or Mr Average—to tell you what the best rod is. The best advice is to get out and try a few yourself. **FI**

J.M. Gillies kindly supplied the Gillies Guide Series reels and shipped the rods from event to event. Mayfly Tackle supplied the GPX lines. Thanks also to the committee members, the importers who supplied the rods, and the casters who gave up an entire day to judge these rods.



A positive correlation between overall mean score and retail price for all the rods tested.