

Let's get bent

Peter Morse examines the intricacies of fighting fish and bending rods.

This sport isn't called "angling" by accident. Once upon a time what we now call a "rod" was known as an "angle", and angles are what it's all about. Dame Juliana Bernier's ancient book "Treatyse on Fishing with an Angle" can be translated as "a book on fishing with a rod". There's no doubt the primary function of a fly rod has always been to deliver a fly,

first and foremost it's a tool designed for casting. The central pillar of fly fishing is fly casting; casting is a beautiful aspect of the sport and can be an utterly absorbing pastime in itself - and if you want to circumvent this, it just doesn't remain "fly fishing" - a fly rod is always going to be a casting tool.

We can read endless texts on casting techniques and of the casting properties of rods (just try staying up late with an FFF casting instructors chat site and you'll see what I mean) but the end use, that of landing a fish effectively, is mostly overlooked and very under taught. We need to study fish fighting as industriously as we study fly tying, knots and rigs, and casting, to learn what is the best shaped bend in a rod, how much pressure we can put on a fish through a particular 10 weight or 8 weight, what happens to the rod and that pressure when angles change, what are the best methods for beating up different fish in different situations, what are the worst, and in particular how do rods get broken during a fight (here's a clue, its not the fish)? I thought it was time we took a closer look at these essential tools that are at the heart of our sport, particularly how we use them once they've served their initial purpose of delivering the fly to the fish.

There's a middle ground where casting function and fish fighting function in a rod can satisfactorily meet. There've been some extraordinary captures made on fly rods with big fish whipped in a very short time by anglers who understand the tackle, and the importance of strategies and angle changes. The record books are filled with astonishing captures made on fly rods that aren't supposed to be good fighting tools, particularly those captures made within the parameters of the IFGA rules. Just as in casting, where there's a time for tight loops or wide open loops, and different techniques for shooting heads, casting short, tossing big flies, or dealing with contrary winds, fish fighting also has an array of techniques that need to be understood and learned, it's not simply a matter of bending the rod.

A recent incident highlighted for me the scope of the misunderstanding of how to use a fly rod to beat a fish. I was on a trout river in New Zealand where high bent rods are the norm and hooked a good rainbow. I held the rod at about a 45 degree angle and "bowed" to the fish when it launched itself across the pool. The guide (who'd already ticked me off in a previous fight for my low rod angles and general rod work) started on me again "Get that rod right up high, you're not putting any pressure on the fish, and you're not going to tire it out like that". I suggested he leave me to fight the fish my way while he concentrated on netting it and the fish was duly landed and released. When it was released I asked him to take a wrap of the leader around his finger and showed him the difference in pressure I'd been putting on the fish, compared to how he wanted me to bend the rod. The result of this demonstration was an eye opener for him and he was gracious enough to admit a lesson learned.

The difference between the two methods (low rod/high rod) is considerable. Both have their short falls, the first poses a higher risk to tippets, knots, and hooks, but lands fish quicker and can be used on very big fish or to extract fish from cover. The reality of the latter, although it looks spectacular and effective, is that its an older model based on protecting light tippets made from horse-hair or silkworm gut, and for protecting fine hooks and poor knots; it's a minimal pressure wear 'em down situation. HOWEVER its use does promote a far greater risk of breaking rods.

I suspect that because this high backward bend so often breaks rods (through their physical limitations) there's a belief that they break because so much pressure is being applied to the fish, which is absolute rubbish. It's the nature of the shape of the bend that breaks the rod - not the pressure being exerted on the fish, which as our measured bend tests show here is actually very small.

Conversely there's also a somewhat condescending attitude amongst some saltwater guys that high rod angles are an



LEFT: John Haenke applies maximum side strain on a goldie in the shallows. These are fish you really do need to take the fight right up to.

indication of poor technique, that it's an inferior "trouty" bend. I recall watching a very experienced saltwater fly guy lose a string of bones in rough country because he maintained a low bend once hooked up. When he held the rod well above his head the line was kept clear of the coral and the bend in the rod absorbed the surges and sudden direction changes. Truth is, for the right situation most bends are good. Any doubts can be immediately dispelled by the practical example of holding the leader while someone runs through a range of angles and pulls.

We need to understand that just about the least effective tactic an angler can employ is to use the same rod angle and bend throughout the fight, that is rod butt tucked hard into the belly like it was glued there. There are two important "pressure points" to consider external to those in the rod - one is the pressure on the business end, the fish, lets call it the "fight pressure", and the other is the pressure we, the angler, have to endure to sustain this pressure, lets call it the "angler pressure". "Angler pressure" is only really a factor in a long drawn out battle with a big fish, we have the musculature to deal with it most of the time, however poor early technique can (and often does) lead to overly long fights. Then, like a marathon runner, fatigue becomes

an issue for the angler and technique degenerates.

It's the application of the most efficient and effective "fight pressure" that matters most and this is where a knowledge of the tackle really comes into its own. You need to spend time with friends and a good set of scales getting to know what you can pull through a rod and how changing the angle of the rod affects the "fight pressure". Being able to sustain that pressure is a good deal easier on a shorter rod (or a longer rod used as a shorter lever) and that lever works both ways. The essential element as I see it is to be capable of maintaining or intensifying the pressure on a fish without pulling a deeper (or higher) bend into the rod unless its necessary and like casting to be able to move that pressure by changing the angle of the rod according to the situation.

Rod Harrison likens rod work to martial arts and this is an excellent description of the range of counter punching manoeuvres we as fly fishermen need to come up with. The great tarpon angler Andy Mills talks about be able to counter punch like a boxer, you need these moves and he does it through rod angles and deft footwork. Fights are not one dimensional, no single technique can or need be applied to all fish. Justin Duggan uses another description - "being

able to increase the pressure on the fish without increasing the pressure on the tackle".

How much pressure you can apply on a fish through a fly rod is dependant upon a few things. Primarily a combination of the designated line weight of the rod and the internal structure (the cut of the cloth which determines the shape of the bend) are going to have a big bearing on what you can safely pull through a rod. Although they might all sweetly cast the same fly line, not all 8 weights are the same when it comes to beating up a fish, or at the other end of the scale, of protecting a light tippet.

You can break down a fly rod into three broad working departments (not physical sections), tip, middle, and butt. The tip is for casting short and protecting light tippets, the middle is for casting further with larger, heavier flies and although the butt on some rods is a big part of the cast, especially distance casting, essentially it should be treated as being the "fighting department". Awareness of where and when in the rod you're applying pressure is fundamental to dealing with situations and understanding fighting techniques and we need to learn to use this butt section.

Once hooked, fish have as diverse a range of behaviour as they do when they're swimming free. If you can identify, or at least categorise the size and species you're hooked up to you're going to be ahead of the game and can pre-empt some stages of the fight. Is it a line burner such as a giant herring, mackerel, or a tuna or is this thing going to head straight for home? The tactical fight decisions and the angle at which you should use the rod are determined by species and habitat, as well as tippet class and the absence of shock tippet. The decision to go hard on something with an abrasive mouth to land it quickly and avoid the wear through or to go softly for the same result with a consequently longer fight time is a decision you might need to make. The presence of sharks is also a determining factor on how we react, with the "light pressure, free spool option" always a good approach.

We can afford to keep a relatively high angle on a shallow running, low stamina, leaping fish such as a queenfish, or

a shallow water speedster such as a bonefish, and in fact it's a good tactic. Conversely we can't keep a rod high on a deep diving fish that has to be lifted from the depths, and nor can we afford to keep a rod high on a fish we want to stop getting into structure. Try a deep curvaceous bend on a diving kingfish and you're likely to end up with splinters of graphite in your face. But try bouncing a saratoga or a bass out of the lily pads with a low flat bent rod and see what happens; its not easily accomplished with a light rod and a low angle. Go heavier, keep the rod high to keep the fish's head up (what I call "popping" it, utilise its jumping) and just keep it coming across the lilies, it's an inglorious result for the fish but a successful outcome for the angler. On all fish we must change the angles lest things disintegrate both physically and tactically.

In the seconds post hookup often we battle just to stay connected, to clear line and hope we got a good hook set. The questions immediately rattle through my instincts - let it have its head or try and apply the stoppers, what is it, how big is it and what sort of terrain are we in? Once it's established what kind of fight we are going to have we need to recognise the point at which we can go on the front foot, to try and take the initiative, to try and dictate what the fish does. This point can ebb and flow for a time and requires some riding of the drag and rod angle changes. The more pressure we can apply, the quicker it happens.

With a lot of line out (I'm talking hundreds of metres) you really need to think about the effect on the tippet and the "fighting pressure" from the drag of all that line in the water and a diminishing spool circumference. Lower your rod, back off the drag, and apply gentle pressure with your hand if necessary. This is just about the only time I'll seriously use a rim control because I believe that if you pay good money for a reel to have a great drag you shouldn't have to go sticking your hand in there to slow a fish. (I will make the point here that I very rarely fish above 10 kg tippets).

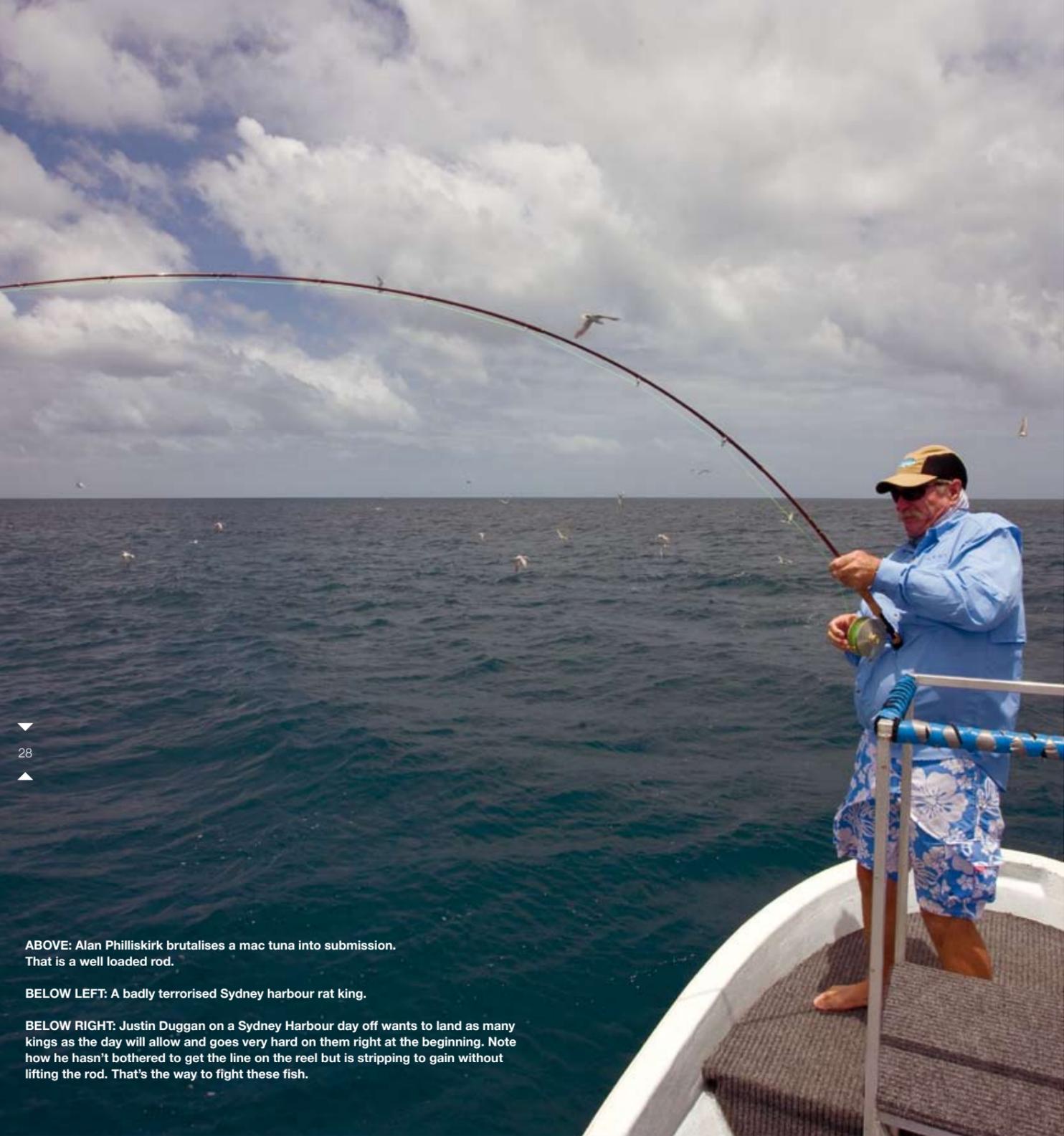
You have two tactics the further out a fish gets, one is to the lower rod angle to the point where the line is coming straight off the reel (higher risk) and the other is to get the rod high and back the drag off, (this is of course entirely dependant

THIS PAGE: With an awful lot of line out Richard Bertin relaxes, drops the rod and eases the drag on a big bonefish.

RIGHT: Gold spot trevally (or all trevally generally) are the fish that most saltwater fly fishers first learn to put a decent bend on. The alternative usually costs you at least a fly and often a fly line.

FAR RIGHT: A permit surges as its about to be landed and rather than give it line Alan Philiskirk drops the rod and moves his body to absorb the surge. This throws a meter of movement the fish's way without giving it any line. You need great faith in your knots to fish like this.





ABOVE: Alan Philliskirk brutalises a mac tuna into submission. That is a well loaded rod.

BELOW LEFT: A badly terrorised Sydney harbour rat king.

BELOW RIGHT: Justin Duggan on a Sydney Harbour day off wants to land as many kings as the day will allow and goes very hard on them right at the beginning. Note how he hasn't bothered to get the line on the reel but is stripping to gain without lifting the rod. That's the way to fight these fish.

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on the species and how much line is out). This is my preferred option because that high rod absorbs sudden changes and lunges – it also keeps a good deal of the line clear of the water. I might be a good deal more blasé about a longtail tuna (first option) than I would be a big mackerel (second option). When it comes time to put line back on the reel I'll raise the rod and start cranking - this will give me time to let go should the fish surge again, it will absorb that surge. With a fish well out I'm not going to play silly buggers with the drag until the fly line is back on the reel. With a lot of line out its pointless working rod angles to try and affect the swimming motion of a fish, its really not until you have the fly line on the reel that you can start to play tricks and exercise the "down and dirty" option.

An up and down fish in deep water is a very different animal from a surface fish. What wins this kind of battle is sustained unrelenting pressure, don't give the buggers a moment's respite. I like to wring every last bit of stretch out of the system, get the rod tip under the water and go to work with a very short lift and wind – I call it "inch by winch" and never aim to initially make big line gains with big lifts of the rod, because as has been demonstrated in the images here, this eases pressure on the fish – GIVE THEM NOTHING! Keep the bent rod moving parallel with the curve in short strokes. This is when "maintaining the bend" rather than "increasing the bend" plays a key role. Bending knees and using your body (and at times even just using the rocking of the boat), rather than just lifting with arms, is what bowls fish over quickly.

As a reminder of the best angle, it's a very good tactic to keep the tip of the rod under, or just touching the water (this of course depends on the depth of the boat you're in). With "inch by winch" tactics you can usually break most fish pretty quickly; its real red line stuff and you need to have absolute faith in your connections. With a fully loaded and red lined tippet it's a time to be using body movement to absorb lunges and surges, to not be rigid, adopt a good boxers approach to counter the fish's movements, this is when "give no line" tactics were born, line loss is eliminated through body movement, but the line is very fine.

A closing fight is fraught with dangers, especially for the tippet and the rod. Once a fish is close, and close for me means it's broken the surface and is almost ready for landing, its time to back off the drag, ease the pressure and deepen the rod bend a little higher in the rod. This is because there's no stretch left in the system, you need to be on your toes to prevent a hook straightening or pulling, or a tippet popping, but you don't want your rod so high that "high sticking" is a consequence. Take your time on this.

Some fights are brief and one dimensional but big fish can lead to sustained battles and a multitude of phases. The advantage we give to a fish is slackening off pressure. The real skill is in sustaining unrelenting pressure and this is done by not lifting the rod – maintain the bend low in the rod, don't deepen it by moving the bend higher in the rod, it's all about angles. You need to have your wits about you and be prepared to avoid going over the red line.

TOP RIGHT: Steve Gresham maintains a deep bend in the rod and well bent knees to handle the thrashings of a saratoga bought to boatside.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Toby Evans bends his knees and follows a diving Coroboree barramundi. Note the rod away from the body ready to move and counter punch as the fish plays up around the boat. Classic "give no line tactics".

BOTTOM RIGHT: Charles Rangeley-Wilson on a smoker of a bonefish – great rod position to survive that opening run.



BEND TESTS

1. Getting to know the bend in a rod and how much pressure a certain bend is putting on a "fish" (preferably by using a set of scales) is an exercise well worth spending some time on. The rod used in these tests is an old fibreglass rod painted white for visibility. In this pic the bender, Ross Italiano is putting as much pressure through the rod that he feels it can take while Jeremy Paterson reads off the scales. This is a great bend shape for any rod. To apply more pressure you simply need to maintain this shape by leaning back, NOT by lifting the rod higher. The rod shape should remain in a constant parallel curve – to gain line use very short and rapid pump and winds. Pressure here is 5.5 kgs.



2. When we lift the rod higher we move the bend point and heaviest load further up the blank resulting in less pressure on the fish. This is a good angle for several situations. A classic example happened to me recently when I hooked a big giant herring and had no shock tippet. The more pressure you apply the faster a tippet can wear so I took the softer approach and fought it with a higher rod angle. It's also a good angle for protecting lighter tippets and against fish that jump. Pressure here is 4kgs.



3. This is not an effective bend to put pressure on a fish. Once the rod gets to this point the pressure has backed right off -its an angle to use when a fish is close to the boat. Pressure here is 2.5 kgs.



4. This close to high sticking. What breaks rods at this point is downward pressure on the tip towards the butt. It's sometimes very difficult to avoid when trying to land a fish; back the drag off and take your time. If in a boat step back from the gunwales to bring the fish to who ever's going to land it, if wading never wind the leaders in to be shorter than the rod length and leader the fish before picking it up. Pressure here is 2kgs which is a lot because it's a fibreglass rod. Its interesting to note that Ross was very reluctant to take this glass rod beyond this bend because he's grown up using graphite rods. Someone used to glass rods would happily take it further but would also do the same with a graphite rod – and probably break it.

