

Rodmaker Profile: Tapani Salmi

Text and Photos by Tapani Salmi and Power Fibers



PF: How did you get into rod making?

I have always liked wood working and fishing like so many other here in Finland. It developed into flyfishing and fly tying, then to graphite rod building. I heard about bamboo rod making in 1998 and got a friendly warning that it will take all your spare time. I however ordered Wayne Cattanach's book from USA and read it twice, tried to understand and started to make the tools and finally two first rods in 2000. My goal was to make a bamboo rod hanging on the wall to be admired but to my surprise it was outstanding in my fishing – and I was lost.

PF: Who had the greatest impact on you as an rodmaker?

When started year 2000 I tried to read articles and old books but very soon Internet (Rodmakers List, *Power Fibers* etc) was full of new and innovative advices – Internet and all the fellow rod makers was of huge impact and help. Then I put some of my experiences in Finnish language into Web (www.tapanisalmi.fi) and soon there were several other active builders to help me also in

Finland. The cumulative increase in information has been of the greatest impact!

PF: What are some life lessons you've learned from building?

As an amateur builder you are free to make experiments, to try and error and to learn! The tradition of bamboo building is so huge and long lasting that you learn from past and present. The fly fishermen 100 years ago had same ideas, problems and even solutions as we today.

PF: Why did you choose to make bamboo rods?

I was thrilled to use my simple hand tools to produce something so practical for my favorite hobby. Of course the initial surprise was great: to modify the simple natural material into something equal or even better than the expensive Hardy, Sage or Orvis rods.

PF: Do you also make fiberglass or graphite rods? Why?

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Actually I have made a couple of graphite rods using technique similar of bamboo rod making. There are graphite poles/strips available with diameter between two to five millimeters and length of one meter and sold for hobby kite makers with a very low price. I made the rod taper by gluing those strips similarly as the bamboo taper and managed to make a #6 one handed rod and a #7-8 two handed rod. My rod making fellow said that the function and feeling was "as near as possible compared with bamboo" and I have even used them in fishing. The story and info is here: <https://www.tapanisalmi.fi/GRROD.HTML>

PF: What are your personal philosophies about craftsmanship and the making of bamboo fly rods?

As an amateur maker my projects are always experiments. I want to make a rod suitable and practical for some purpose or try to find a solution for some construction problem or some challenge. As I am not selling the rods the appearance is not so critical. I also like to restrict to use hand tools as much as possible, learn new methods and try new tricks to make it easier, faster or even better.

The big challenge has been Atlantic salmon fishing using modern two hand rods on the quite big salmon rivers in the Northern part of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia. I have to use sinking tip, heavy shooting lines, big tube flies and mainly under-hand casting instead of the traditional Spey casting. It has been a continuing challenge to do as good as my graphite rod using friends.

A single Eureka moment made a big impact: in 2007 in Egypt I noticed that the papyrus reed growing in the constant flow of river Nile is triangle in cross section. I decided to try to make a triangle bamboo rod instead of hex, penta or quad rods which I already had built. It turned out that the power (moment of inertia) of a triangle rod is much higher than hex, penta or quad of equal mass. The triangle construction

helps a lot if you want to make a long powerful and light two hand rod. The challenge with tools, tapers, ferrules and all the details has been fascinating but I have resulted to make quite useful two hand 12-13' #9-10 rods for salmon fishing and single hand 9-9,5' #5-7 rods for streamer, nymph and boat fishing. These types of fly fishing has most typically been "graphite only" and popular part of fly fishing.

PF: Who are you most proud to have made a rod for?

My triangles have been a surprise for several experienced bamboo makers in European and Catskills Rodmakers Gatherings. The fellow makers are always very polite to each other, but when you manage to get all the line out for first time using a bamboo rod you certainly tell it!

PF: What would you like to see in your rods and other maker's rods?

We have different and equally fine goals ambitions in bamboo rod making: perfect glue lines, perfect varnish and gloss, exact accuracy, traditional tapers equal to old masters rods etc. I would introduce and add experimentation: it is possible to use "new tricks" to make "new rods" and satisfying or even good fishing tools using the natural material and simple hand tools. I would be very happy to see any new ideas in rod building either in triangle or other aspects.

PF: What are your personal favorite streams to fish?

I have visited the northern part of Finland, Norway and Russia every summer on both small and big salmon rivers. The joy of both experienced and newbie friends when they get a contact and quite often lose the wild Atlantic salmon is very unique and most memorable .

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PF: Do you have a memorable story of fishing bamboo or memories of anyone in particular people you've fished with?

There are some long fights with big fishes most often lost, sometimes producing permanent set to the rod.

In addition to the memories the future dreams to use the rod you are making are important: you hope and believe that next trip and next season and next summer with the new rod makes dreams-come-true. It is like Christmas: you know the truth but following winter you are happy to repeat the dreaming.

PF: What do you think most rodmakers struggle with the most when they're starting out?

The hooking to any hobby includes a "long learning curve", also in rod making. Some of the struggles and blocks are very obvious – you have to have the workshop and some special tools and these are certainly most common reasons to avoid starting. You actually don't need all the possible tools or a large room but if it is possible to have some space to leave the components waiting the next weekend or next free time period the process goes more smoothly. In Finland boys are often familiar to use wood working tools and lot of people really like wood working, boat making and even wood house making. The use of tools is not problem for those. When I started it was difficult to get information about tools, glues, delivery of bamboo, etc., but today due to Internet it is not any problem even in Finnish language.

PF: How do you think these struggles can best be avoided?

When people are interested in bamboo I ask them some basic questions and then often encourage them by telling that they are much more skillfull than me when starting. I have built two binding machines during the years but actually I bind the rods by hand. The challenges of quality of varnishing is mostly inside your head. If you are an amateur you may use quite simple methods. When continuing further the

building process these challenges are giving extra steps into your "learning curve". Actually the first rods are often very carefully done and are the most memorable and valuable in your fishing. Luckily you may never result in totally flawless cane rod, there is always something to do better.

PF: What is your least and most favorite part of the building process?

Actually any problems like breaking the rod, failures of glue line, ferrule, or scarf joint or errors in planing, glueing, varnishing are the most teaching accidents for you and you certainly learn best that way. I used to tell my graphite-friends that I actually wish to break some of my rods every summer to learn more. I have done that also by testing with overweight line or bending the joints.

The straightening typically takes time before the "real work". The solution came with soaking of the strips. Then I introduced "all-wet-planing". I measured 40 strip locations before and after 3 days soaking and then after heat treating and resulted 3,5% swelling-shrinking. Thereafter I have added 3% to the taper values, plane wet to those measures, heat treat and glue.



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The measures are certainly not perfectly exact but exact enough for an amateur. No frequent plane blade sharpening as cane is like butter and no perfect straightening as small curves and kinks do not disturb when cane is so soft. You may say that I am lazy and sloppy (and may be right), but in business world "lean thinking" is the most modern and popular way of thinking!

Because I like to make triangle rods the ferrules and joints have been a problem. I have found that the very cheap polyester tube from any car part shop may be used instead of graphite in my scarf /spliced joints. I also have tried to develop a simple solution for extreme hollowing of my long rods using "external bridges" instead of laborious "internal bridges" or "fluting". Actually the result is near to well familiar "intermediate wraps", see details in European gathering lecture: https://www.tapanisalmi.fi/Waischenfeld2018_Salmi.pdf

The idea to own several rods is of course to have a right rod for the right fishing situation. Quite often it is possible with a DIY cane rod. That process, to evaluate the necessary features of the rod and then to build it, is very satisfying. If you make rods to your clients it is certainly more difficult than when making to yourself.

PF: What are your thoughts on multiple rod geometries? Thinking of quad, penta, hex and triangle rods.

We know the old description "fly fishing is the most beautiful way of fishing". So the two goals are the "beauty" and the "function". The features to make a rod valuable or desirable for possible clients are important. The accurate copy of some old masterpiece and nice components also are the "beauty". It is however educational to read those 100+ years old books on rod building and the long stories about the different materials like Greenheart, Calcutta, Tonkin and then about the different geometries to achieve the advantageous and important functions and properties which are very similar to our very present wishes.

I am not skillfull in building bevelers, in metal or gem working, so the "fishing function" goes first for me. I have been interested in modifying the

geometries, it has been the important part of the learning curve in my hobby. The fishing of atlantic salmon has been a special challenge. This has changed a lot due to fast graphite rods and new type of lines and flies. As the old spey rods are not very suitable it has been very stimulating to adapt to the present demands using the triangle geometry and trying hollow building of long two hand rods.

Actually the most fly fishermen in Finland are using rods of 8,5-10' in length in trout or grayling fishing and they would prefer rolling casts. There are some obvious advantages to use a longer cane rod and it is a good goal for a bamboo maker to win the wrong beliefs of the heavy and slow bamboo.

The taper conversion from hex to triangle has been problematic and more or less experimental. This autumn Christian Burger introduced me to MOI (moment of inertia) equations for triangle and we are beta-testing Excel conversion from Hex into solid and hollow triangle. I hope to have the conversion software on my home page soon.

PF: What type of rivers do you fish in Finland? How does this environment influence rod design for you?

In Finland we have lot of lakes and rivers but historically our economy has been based mainly on woods and forests and most of the rapids have been built either for timber rafting or for electric power plants. Therefore the sea running trout and salmon are in troubles and the best fishing rivers are in Northern Finland, Lapland. Those big rivers are a challenge to bamboo! Actually there are some promising small rivers also near to Helsinki we try to restore to help fishes, sea trout – not so much for fishing possibilities.

PF: Do you make rods using mostly your own tapers or do you use published tapers?

I started of course from the published tapers and the difference between cane and graphite was the first unforgettable experience. I like PH Young, Bill Waara (origin from Finland!) "Parabolic" –

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type tapers with extra power to handle streamers. The development of own tapers started mainly when changing the taper geometry and adding some extra strength compared to the existing rod. The real challenge has been two-hand 12-14' and long 9-10' rods, to use them all day and not to be a body-builder.

PF: What do you/did you do for a living? How does your work experience impact your rodmaking/rod design?

My mother was a teacher and some of my first memories are to go to wood working classroom at age of 5-6 years where a very pleasant teacher let me do something easy. So I have liked woodworking all my life. I am MD and been working at Helsinki University Hospital. My day schedule goes late if some my patients mentions "fly fishing"! Actually I have a reflex hammer with split cane handle, cork and some lead inside to make it heavy and I am using it every day. Please do not tell to medical authorities that it is not a CE /medical approved device! It is good for a man to have some hobby far enough from the routine. For me it has been fly fishing and bamboo rod making.

PF: Sometimes we take for granted the availability of rodmaking materials and tools in the US. What difficulties do you find being a rodmaker in Europe?

My career started before Internet and at that time there were lot of problems. I found some old articles and some old Finnish rod makers not active anymore helped in the beginning. The first bamboo poles from England were carried for free in shipping container to the Helsinki Science Museum with some material to my brother working at the Museum. Some poles to us came from Florida with an Audi of my friend moving from USA back to Finland. I built him an ice fishing cane rod for compensation. Now using Internet (including PF magazine) and with goodwill of the fellow rodbuilders like Todd you get any information and help on everything – their help has been extremely important. Today we have lot of skillfull makers and artisans in Finland and Europe and it easy to get help, advices, and material.

PF: If you could start rodmaking over again, what would you change, knowing what you know now?

Luckily some of the early blocks and difficulties at that time do not exist anymore. In beginning you are not sure about the longevity of the new hobby and you may buy cheapest possible tools. I am happy to have all my fingers left, not burned the house or got any dermatitis by using epoxy and solvents. At that time it was not possible to really see or have a video of some maker or of some difficult task in building but now it is no



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problem either. I have enjoyed to participate some European and even Catskills Gatherings to cast new rods and every time learned something new, it is somehow "starting over again" every autumn.

PF: You mentioned not being skilled building bevelers. What is your rodmaking process? Do you use hand tools start to finish?

I try to manage with simple tools as rodmaking is for me a hobby. I work with soaked bamboo until the final dimensions (I add +3% for the swelling). I simply plane and sand the nodes. I have made several planing forms from nylon and have one wooden for the very wide strips for salmon rods. For the 30-120-30 degree strips used to the three strips triangle I have a 120 degree Baginski beveler to transform a 60-60-60 degree strip to a 30-120-30 strip of equal width. I bind the rods by hand using quite thick cheap nylon rope, it is easy to adjust the strength and to avoid twisting. I have tried several varnishing process, even applied superglue (Loctite) to the rod. It works quite fine for guide wraps! So keep it simple!

PF: What led you to explore making triangle rods?

As I mentioned, it really was an Eureka moment in Egypt where we were with my wife as tourists and I saw the triangle papyrus reed growing in river Nile. I immediately said to my wife that I should try triangle geometry of bamboo rod – there has to be some advantage for the reed to be triangle when living in continuous flow. I already had tried hex, quad and penta, an inside-out structure and even an asymmetric penta rod, which was a slow and changed fast by turning the handle 90°. So it was an experiment which resulted much more successful than typically for me.

PF: It also appears you've done quite a bit of work with hollowing. What type of hollowing do you recommend? Why do you recommend this form of hollowing? Do you hollow all rods you make?

Hollowing is a must for long and two hand rods. The elastic "power" of bamboo is extremely good longitudinally but there are not so much circular or torsion strength. We all know how easily bamboo may be split by hand. The hollow bamboo rod tends to "explode" when bending and twisting e.g. in Spey casting, if you do not have some internal bridges to give the circular strength to it. In hollow graphite rods there are the strong fibres both longitudinally and crosswise, circularly. I try to imitate the graphite building by wrapping external support to the hollow bamboo and I need no internal bridges or fluting. This could be made by dense intermediate wraps or more easily by a continuous circular spiral wrap using silk or thin monofilament. So far this seems to work also for two hand rods. The greatest impact of hollow building comes in thick part of my triangle rods. In thin rods and tip the difference is minimal.

PF: It seems that you also use spliced joints quite a bit. Why do you use these? When would you recommend using these for joining rods?

I am not skillfull enough to make NS ferrules using a lathe. Traditionally spliced joints are used in two hand salmon rods and that was the reason to start. Several professional makers have tried also graphite ferrules as they are lighter than NS. In Catskills meeting 2017 I saw a demonstration of short spliced joint with graphite tube support. I have now tried this also to my salmon rods and found the cheap polyester tube material to the supporting tube. This method is easy enough for an amateur maker like me.

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PF: What do you think the future holds for rodmaking? Are there any innovations or hurdles you can see coming in the future?

The epoch of plastics seems to be over and there is lot of research of fibres based on cellulose and other "natural fibres" to make recycled materials, membranes, cloths, textiles and even car parts. This could result in new techniques to make also rods using chemically processed bamboo or other fibres. Perhaps we could then 3D -print components like reel seats or ferrules or planing forms from bamboo fibres. I already had a discussion with a friend using laser cutting in his business (it burns the fibres and was not recommended) - so there are certainly new innovations also for our old tradition.

PF: if you were sitting across from someone thinking about getting into bamboo rod-making, what is the one piece of advice you'd give them?

Don't be afraid of the difficulties, you are going to like both the craft and the results!

PF: Would you be willing to share a favorite taper?

This is my 9' #5-6 streamer& nymph rod - you have seen graphite fellows with their long 9-9,5' rods and big flies on lakes or big stream.

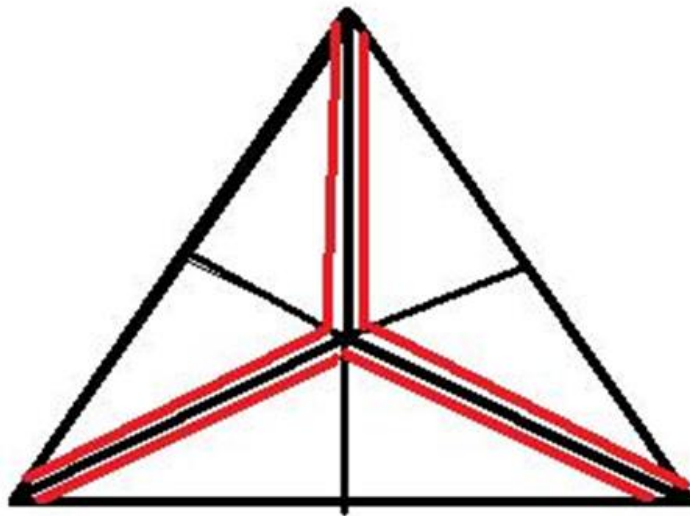
The first values of the taper are for the single strip! You first make the six hex strips according to the values. Then you scrape the surface (enamel site) flat and glue them inside-out so that the power fibers are against each other as three pairs of strips. Thereafter you plane the pith part of the strips away to result in the triangle rod with mainly power fibers.

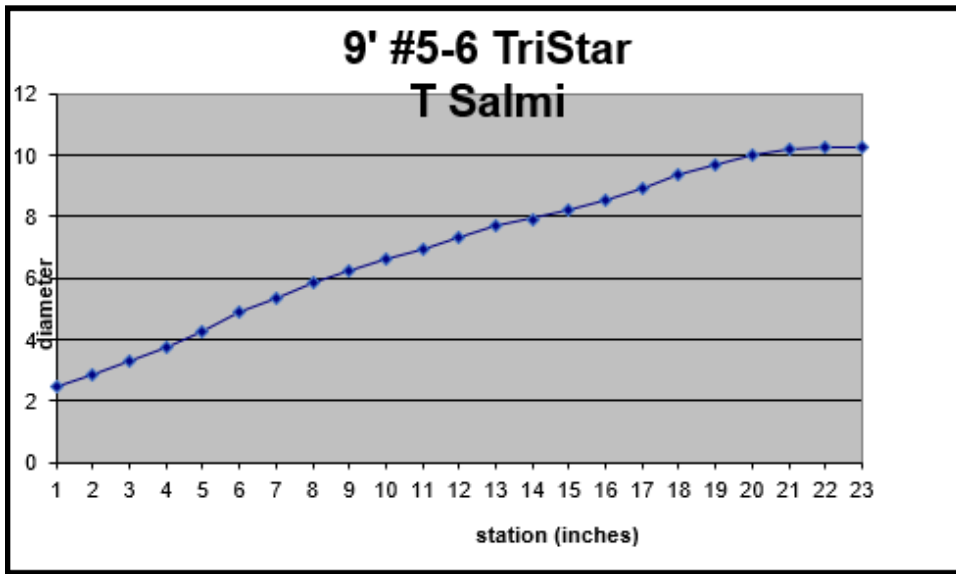
The second values are the flat and height of the finished rod.

[Please check the details for the "tristar" triangle rod here.](#)

See the next page for the taper information.

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9' #5-6 triangle rod, six strips inside-out as tristar structure Tapani Salmi

Station	Single strip		Rod		Rod	
	Height in "	In mms	Height in "	in mms	Flat in "	in mms
0	0.056	1.433	0.098	2.484	0.113	2.867
5	0.065	1.645	0.112	2.851	0.130	3.290
10	0.075	1.906	0.130	3.303	0.150	3.811
15	0.086	2.183	0.149	3.783	0.172	4.365
20	0.097	2.476	0.169	4.291	0.195	4.951
25	0.111	2.818	0.192	4.884	0.222	5.636
30	0.122	3.095	0.211	5.363	0.244	6.189
35	0.133	3.372	0.230	5.843	0.265	6.743
40	0.142	3.600	0.246	6.238	0.283	7.199
45	0.151	3.828	0.261	6.634	0.301	7.655
50	0.158	4.007	0.273	6.944	0.315	8.014
55	0.167	4.235	0.289	7.339	0.333	8.470
60	0.175	4.447	0.303	7.706	0.350	8.893
65	0.181	4.593	0.313	7.960	0.362	9.186
70	0.187	4.756	0.325	8.243	0.374	9.512
75	0.195	4.951	0.338	8.581	0.390	9.903
80	0.203	5.163	0.352	8.948	0.407	10.326
85	0.214	5.424	0.370	9.400	0.427	10.848
90	0.221	5.619	0.383	9.739	0.442	11.239
95	0.228	5.782	0.395	10.021	0.455	11.564
100	0.233	5.912	0.403	10.247	0.466	11.825
105	0.234	5.945	0.406	10.303	0.468	11.890
110	0.234	5.945	0.406	10.303	0.468	11.890

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