

PISCATORIAL PERSONALITY—LEIGH PERKINS

By ED HERBST

The late Ray Bergman, in the opening chapter of his book, *Just Fishing*, gives a warm and delightful account of his introduction to trout fishing under the steely eye and firm tutelage of "Old Jim", the senior citizen of angling in his village, who taught him how to drift a lightly hooked worm through the most likely lies.

Leigh Perkins, President of Orvis, also had an older mentor, but in his case, and far from typically, it was his mother, Katharine, who was the fly-fishing fanatic in the family—his father having not the slightest interest in angling. Needing a companion on her fishing trips, she taught the ten-year-old Leigh the rudiments of fly-fishing, and from then on he accompanied her on annual expeditions in search of trout and salmon. He bought his first Orvis fly rod in 1947 while majoring in English at Williams College in Massachusetts, fished the Battenkill, and wistfully acknowledged that working for Orvis would be, by his criteria, the ideal existence.

However, in those days you were extremely lucky if you could follow your bent. More usually you took whatever job you could get and so, two decades later, Perkins found himself as vice-president of sales in one of the major welding companies in the U.S. Behind him was a career which had taken him through the steel and mining industries, and when he sold his interests in the company to British Oxygen he had both the wherewithal and the inclination to start a new career involving his vocations of bird-shooting and fly-fishing.

An investment banker suggested the acquisition of a company which produced inexpensive fishing tackle, but Leigh quickly realized that the ailing concern was neither viable nor what he was looking for. Suddenly, on impulse, he decided to telephone Orvis on the off-chance that the company might be for sale. Thus began nine months of delicate negotiations with owner Ducky Corkran. "It was like asking a man for his daughter's hand in marriage and up until twenty-four hours before the sale was concluded I was under the impression that Ducky didn't have enough confidence in me."

On January 1, 1965, Leigh Perkins became the third owner of the company formed

by Charles F. Orvis in 1856. During Corkran's tenure as owner the company's main source of income had been its top-quality impregnated split-cane rods, although it also sold a small line of fly-fishing accessories. Perkins felt, however, that the company's growth potential would only be realised with a full complement of proprietary products. Equally important, he felt, was that the name of Orvis become synonymous with a life-style rather than just as a manufacturer and marketer of fly-fishing products.

He has undoubtedly realised his ambition and there have been several milestones along the way. In 1969, with the assistance of famed custom reel maker, Stan Bogdan, Orvis designed the CFO reel, financed the tooling and contracted Hardy to produce it. Working with fly-line manufacturers, Orvis had lines manufactured to its specifications, and their catalogue was the first to picture flies in full colour.

In 1966, as an experiment, Perkins started a fly-fishing school, expecting about 20 applicants. One hundred and fifty signed up, and now close to a thousand people a year take the 2½ day course. This, in turn, led to the establishment in 1973 of the Orvis shooting schools, where tyros learn the elements of wing shooting and can purchase the Orvis line of fine Spanish doubles, custom-built to their measurements and specifications, at a fraction of the price of equivalent English shotguns.

A major turning point in Orvis' direction came in 1974, when virtually no bamboo was coming out of Communist China: this despite the fact that the U.S. Government had lifted its embargo on trade with that country. Faced with the choice of laying off skilled rod-makers or getting involved in graphite rod production far more quickly than their normally conservative approach dictated, Perkins gambled on being able to market rods made with this new material which had yet to prove itself. Engineer Howard Steere, the company rod designer and vice-president of manufacturing, welcomed the new challenge and requested the funds necessary for the research and design of graphite rods. The early prototype rods were so promising that the board of directors approved the building and tooling of a new factory for producing low modulus graphite rods. The rest is history, Orvis graphite rods were so successful and trouble-free that total rod production grew from 9 000 in 1974 to 20 000 today.

Another milestone was the launching of the company newspaper, *The Orvis News*, to keep the public abreast of its new products and services. It proved outstanding as a vehicle for communicating with customers. Orvis has increased their customer list from 30 000 in 1965 to 750 000 at present. Orvis mailed 70 000 catalogues in 1965 and now mails over 12 million.

Two years ago Perkins bought out Dermot Wilson's mail-order angling business, fishing school and rights to beats on both the Test and Itchen rivers at Nether Wallop, Hampshire, England. "I was struck by the similarities between our community on the Battenkill and the community at Nether Wallop, each making a living from fly-fishing on rivers which had an enormous symbolic significance in terms of their contribution to the history and development of our sport." Perkins candidly admits that his English operation does not contribute to company profits but he has a justifiable love for and reverence of the rivers where fly-fishing was born, and values the feedback from British and European anglers which is relayed to him from Nether Wallop by his son, Perk.

Two of the biggest money spinners in the Orvis range of sporting clothing and outdoor gifts have been a special cushion for dogs, called the Dog's Nest, and Georgia Fatwood, an extremely efficient, resin-rich kindling. He acknowledges that the profits from such items allows Orvis to spend far more money on the research and development of fishing tackle than the return from this section of his business justifies. As an example he mentions that the development cost of designing a graphite rod from scratch is some 1 500 dollars, whereas each boron/graphite rod costs a minimum of 10 000 dollars to design and develop. Did he agree then, I asked him, with the following statement by Carl Richards, Doug Swisher and Fred Arbona in their recently published

book, *Stoneflies*, “. . . as a rod material, graphite has been developed as far as we can go with it. It is doubtful that we could develop rod blanks with over five percent more efficient actions than the blanks we have today, and probably less than one percent of



Leigh Perkins.

Photograph by Orvis per Ed Herbst.

our present-day fly casters could take advantage of the slight improvement.” Perkins opined that this was a negative approach and that any rod designer who subscribed to such a self-defeating philosophy was unlikely to progress.

Certainly the public response to the new “Western Series” of Orvis graphite fly rods would seem to give the lie to that statement. Designed to give the angler in the American West more power for long casts into the wind without compromising traditional Orvis delicacy, the Western Series proved so popular that Howard Steere had to increase production to meet the demand. In additional support of this, he cited Howard Steere’s newest design, a rod he considers to be the pinnacle of his company’s achievement in 126 years of fly rod building—a graphite 7 ft. 9 in. rod for a two-weight line. He admits to being somewhat sceptical when it was first shown to him, but on the Battenkill it proved a revelation. He was amazed at the distance and accuracy he achieved. “It’s a new dimension, the most delightful and precise stream rod I have ever used,” he said enthusiastically. One can fish 7X (1.1 pound breaking strain) tippets with this rod without fear of breaking off most fish on the take. This summer Perkins first fished this ultra-fine rod to the *Tricorythodes* spinner fall (size 24) on the Battenkill. He used 7X tippets exclusively, only popped a tippet once and that he attributed to his own clumsiness. Later, on the Test and Itchen in England, the rod proved itself on the selective chalk stream fish. He and his party caught 30 trout weighing up to 3 lb. on the two-weight ultra-fine rod.

Obviously such a light line is going to require an exceptionally thin coating over its braided core. As no suitable line exists, Orvis has negotiated with Scientific Anglers

to produce the first commercially available two-weight double-taper line, feeling that the hydrophobic (water-repellant) chemical formulation of the new Air-Cel Ultra lines is sufficiently advanced to make this project viable. Good news for South African fly fishermen is that the Orvis president promised his local agents, The Flyfisherman in Pietermaritzburg, the first production models of this rod to come out of the factory, and they arrived in the Republic in December.

Ask Perkins about his ambitions and how he sees the future of his company and his answer has both clarity and warmth, reflecting his ability as a successful businessman in a fiercely capitalistic society and a love of country life. Deeply aware that the respect which Orvis has built in 126 years of service to outdoorsmen depends totally on today's quality control, he says simply, "We must continue to develop our reputation for supplying top-quality clothing and equipment which enhance a country-life style." Behind the homespun patina of the Orvis catalogue is a high-tech world of computers, marketing specialists and systems analysts, but Perkin has a reverence for his company's history and heritage and is determined that Orvis will not forget its roots.

To this end he contributes five percent of annual profits to organisations which promote environmental conservation such as The Forest Wildlife Foundation, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, The Atlantic Salmon Federation, Ducks Unlimited and others. This amount attains its correct perspective when one considers that it is three times larger than the national average of donations by U.S. firms to non-profit organisations.

Leigh Perkins, in his brief South African visit, quickly developed an affinity for our country and its people and immediately made plans for the earliest possible return visit which his crowded itinerary would allow—September 1985. He has pursued his hobbies of fly-fishing and shooting birds on the wing with a shotgun in 26 countries, and after shooting in Barkly East and seeing some of the mounted specimens of trophy trout taken in the area, he is convinced that what South Africa has to offer in this regard compares with the best in the world.

Asked what country produced the finest fly fishing, he said that he put the Bow River in Calgary, Canada, at the top of his personal list. "It is an extremely fertile and productive river with almost continual hatches and, if you are interested in dry fly fishing for large, free-rising rainbows, this river is hard to beat. For big trout and great scenery try Alaska or Argentina, but there is little fishing to rising fish." Surprisingly, he recommends New Zealand only to advanced fly fishermen, saying that it is exceptionally difficult angling for selective fish and that one fish a day is often the norm—although that fish will be a big one and you will feel well rewarded.

"But you chaps have it all, South Africa's tourist potential in terms of fly-fishing and bird-shooting is surprisingly unexploited," he concludes.