The furled leader

by Andrew Fuller

Silk fly lines and furled leaders made by Terenzio Zandri have proved well suited to South African streams.

I have fiddled around with many different leaders in my time as a fly-fisher.

I started out with a length of simple monofilament, which my old man reckoned had to be the length of your rod. While I think his advice on the length was not far wrong, I was soon captivated by the concept of a knotless monofilament tapered leader.

It is those tapered leaders that really got me going. It all seemed to make sense to me. No joints to catch bits of weed and the like. Just a seamless thread, right down to the fly. And when the time came to add a tippet, that was okay too. Just one little blood-knot - which was useful to hold a strike indicator anyway.

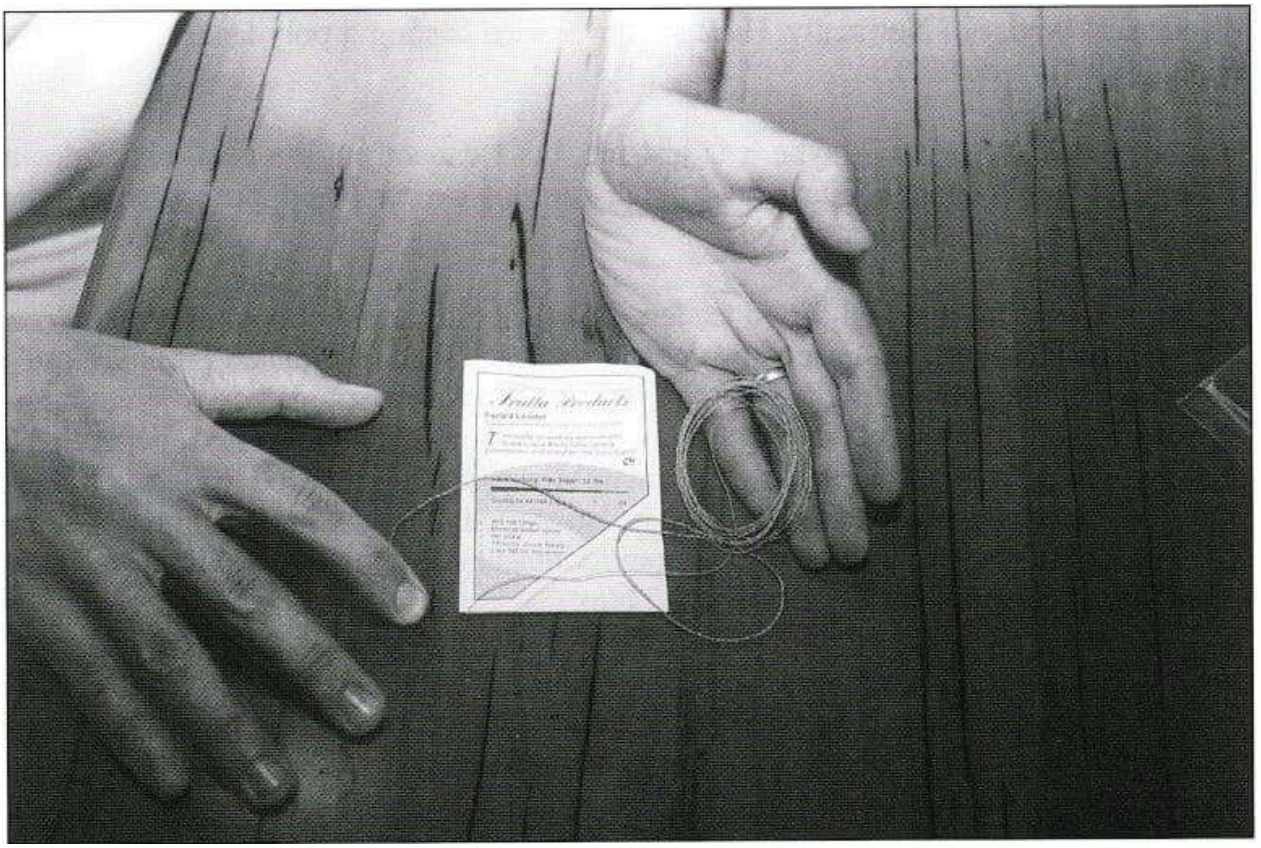
The thing that bothered me about them though, was that they had such a heavy diameter in the butt section. I found that my loops never lay straight (although I confess that at the time I had not been introduced to the perfection loop). The butt always had terrible memory too and, as a result, the first few yards lay upon the water like barbed wire on a battlefield. Because of this, I started cutting off the first three feet of the bought leaders, the moment I removed them from the packet.

This helped a great deal. And so, for many years, I was relatively happy. Then along came braided leaders. Those were simply wonderful by comparison to the monofilament ones, in terms of their suppleness. However, they were so damned long that, in using my father's length concept, I had little room left for a tippet.

Now, you might call me a fool for not just cutting them down a bit (from the tip end this time), but you have to understand that by that time I was a student and a student cannot bring himself to destroy, minimise, or reduce, something that cost the formidable price of thirty-five rand. And thus it was that I struggled on. I struggled because it was a little too supple. I could not get it to turn over a tippet effectively. The result was a whole row of expertly created wind-knots extending into the expensive braided bit. I persisted with the braided leaders, and was encouraged when they brought out sinking versions, all bathed in lead paste. The paste came off of course - but I was encouraged by the fact that someone was further developing these good ideas.

Braided leaders are still around, and much improved. They are no longer smeared in paste that washes off. I also suspect that my tackle and casting have improved to the point where the wind-knot problem might be a lot less prevalent. However, I was subsequently to be seduced by Airflo “poly-leaders”.

Poly leaders are wonderful in that they have a smooth surface, like the old mono ones, but without the stiffness. And the risk of getting a hook point into a braid and making a bird's nest no longer exists. By now, of course, we have also developed little braided loops that we superglue onto the end of the line. This does away with all those painful barrel knots and needle knots. So with all this convenience, you whip off a slow sinking leader, and plonk on a floater, or a super sinker, and you have total control over the depth of your fly.



The furled leader, a centuries old design that remains as effective as ever.

Wonderful! Well, no. Not really. Have you ever tried casting a poly-leader to a gently sipping trout in a dead calm?

It is not a delicate event. Maybe it is just me, but I cannot put the poly-leader down smoothly. Funnily enough, I have no difficulty turning over a long tippet with it, but the poly leader part lands without grace.

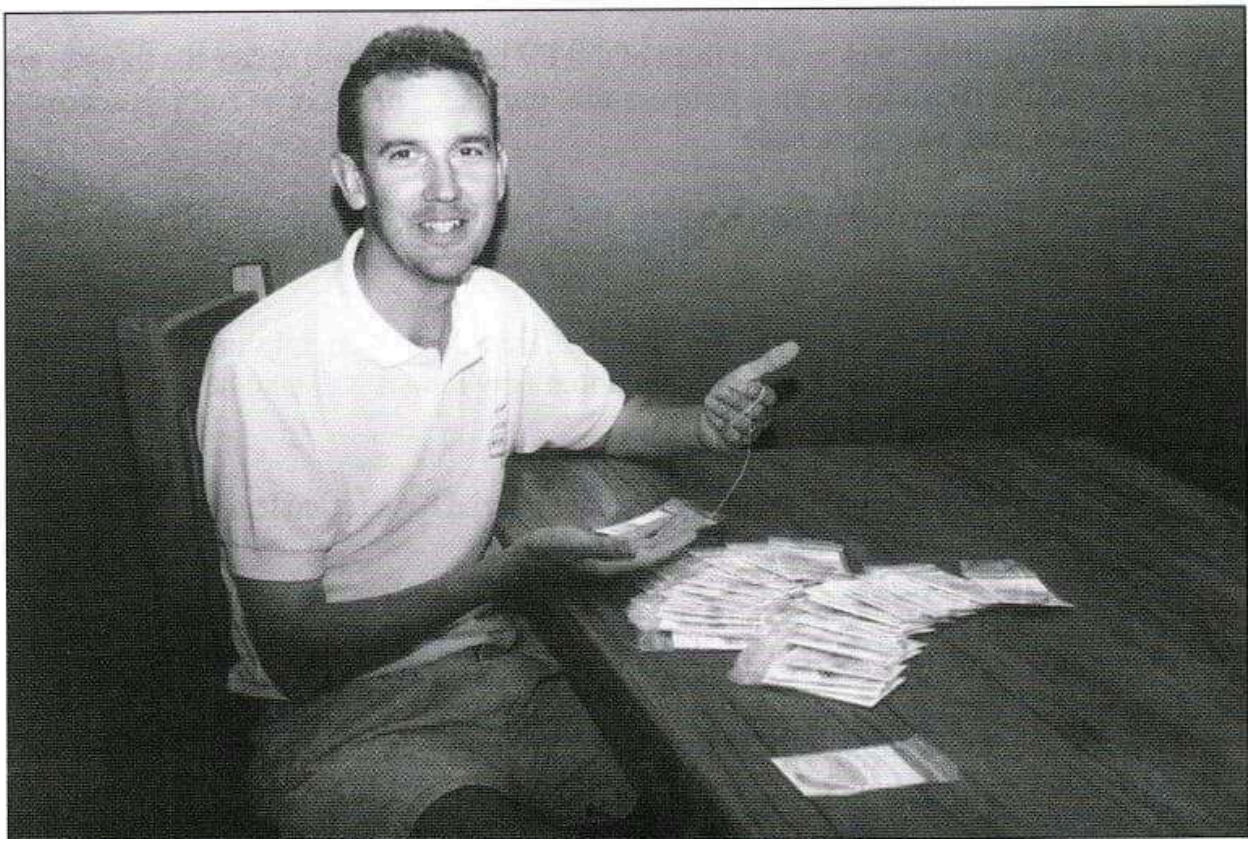
So, enter Darrel Martin, and furled leaders. Martin's outstanding book, *Micropatterns*, revealed that European fly fishers, particularly in Spain, had resurrected Izaak Walton's seventeenth century concept of using spinning weights to twist together different numbers of horse tail hair to produce a tapering line which smoothly transmitted energy to the fly. The innovative Austrian fly fisher, Roman Moser, produces furled leaders commercially and some American companies have also started to do so. Further impetus came from internet sites such as www.canerod.com/rodmakers/ties/furled/furled.html and http://globalflyfisher.com/fishbetter/henk/henk2.htm.

South Africa has not been immune to the furled leader craze and, for the past two years people have been arriving at fly tying meetings, armed with noisy drills, boards and pegs. Everyone I know has elected to use a very fine monofilament as the material for these furled leaders. This is all well and good, but unless you get the number of revolutions correct, the thing wants to wind up on itself. I

discovered this when I first started making them. As soon as I coiled mine to put them away, they twisted, and would not lie in a neat loop. Get into a bit of a mess on a river with one of these, add grass and trees, and give a little tug, and witness an instant weaver's nest!

I found the only solution was to sit in front of the TV for a week and stroke the thing every night. Eventually, like a kid with a temperature, things seem to come right. It seems to lose its tension, and want to behave.

And when you have stroked it for a week (to the amusement of your family), your leader works beautifully.



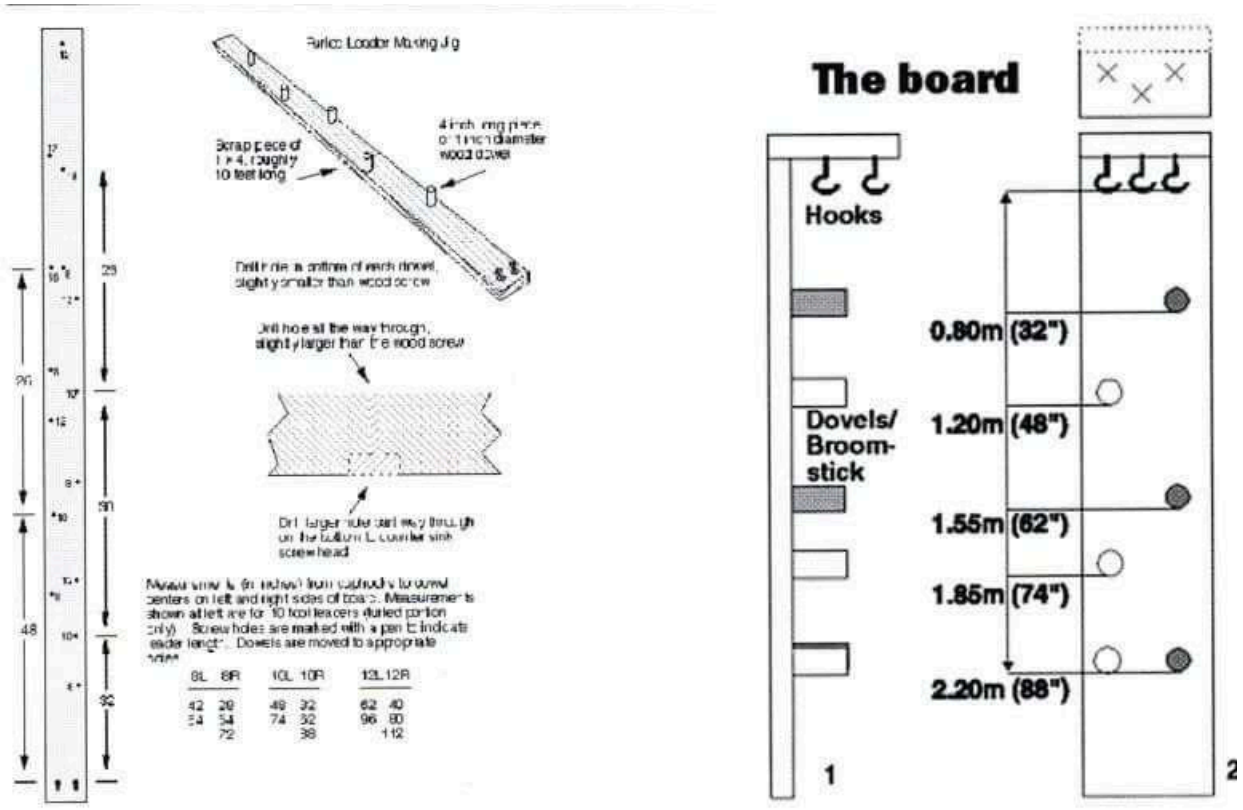
Andrew Fuller displays the Trutta furled leaders that are commercially available from The Flyfisherman shops in Natal.

Others have used fly tying thread as the material. This works better, I think, but it lacks a little of the stiffness of nylon. I also wonder about how long it will take before the thread starts rotting, and losing its strength?

After much thought and debate about the perfect material for a furled leader, it dawned on me that I needed to mix its components.

When I embarked on this mixed-material project I initially got myself horribly confused. I would put the joins in wrong places, and knots would come apart. The problem was resolved when I used materials of different stretch properties, and tapered them on the same pylons, creating visible steps in the taper. I think I've finally got it right. I have now created several recipes, which I have written down. (In fact I have entered them into a spreadsheet that gives me graphs, colour charts, and diagnostic reports!)

First I create a core of one material. For this I use either nylon, or kevlar thread. This is strung on a four or six pylon rig. Then I string what I call the "wadding" on a separate set of pylons (but set in the same line as the first ones). For the wadding I use fly tying silk. Both the core and the wadding run the full length of the leader, and both are suitably tapered. Everything gets wound together. Twenty-five seconds a side with my particular drill. My ten year old son, Luke, keeps time.



Designs for boards constructed to facilitate the manufacture of furled leaders as described on the websites mentioned in Andrew Fuller's article.

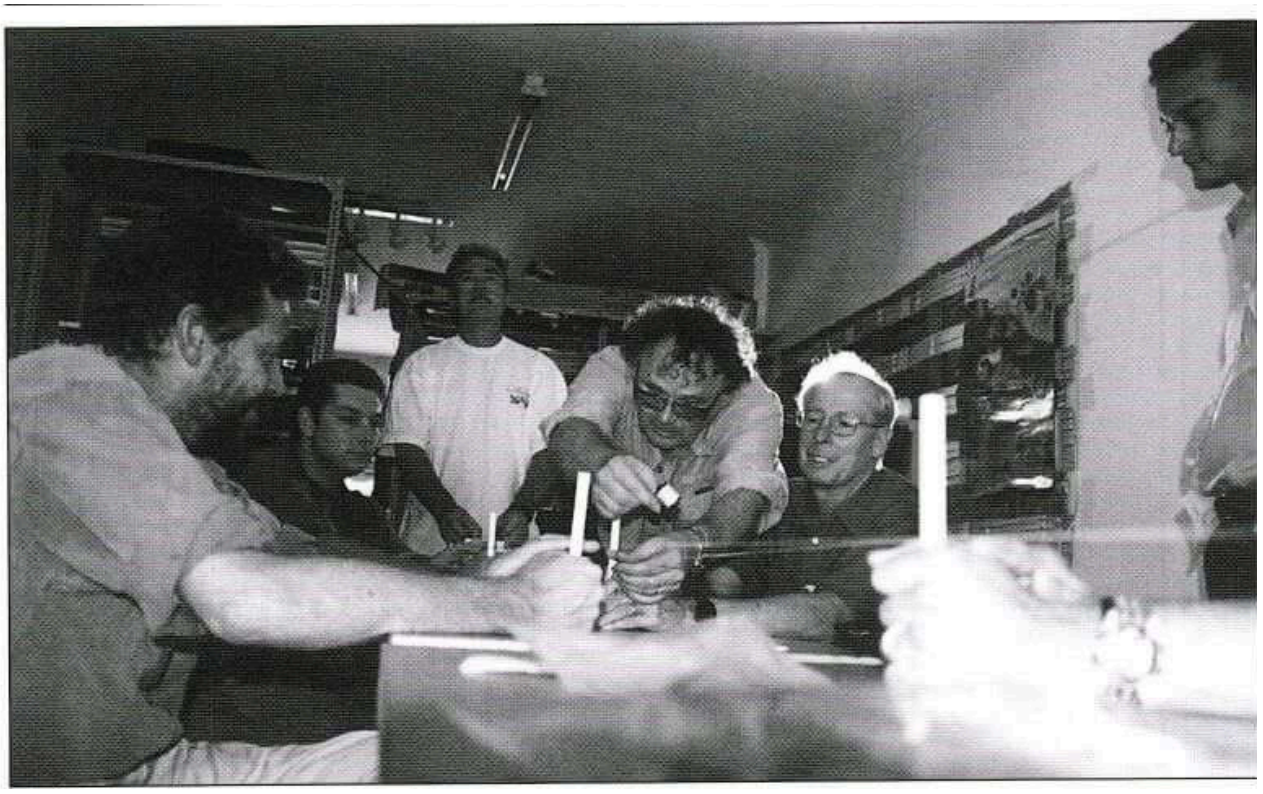
What results is a great leader - even if I say so myself.

My wind formula punches even a light fly straight into a stiff breeze. It has a high nylon component, (but no kevlar which is very strong, but has no "backbone"), and some wadding added. The tip is chartreuse silk, so it provides a decent strike indicator that you can spot even in choppy water.

My “delicate formula” has a very long fine taper, but the kevlar gives it strength, so I have no concerns that the integrity of the leader will be compromised if the thread component weakens over time. This particular formula doesn't turn over a long tippet well, unless you use a stiffer nylon, but a short tippet of about four foot of 5X works just fine.

My standard, general-purpose leader, is based on the time-tested and proven 60/20/20 equation, developed by Charles Ritz some seventy years ago. With this one I can straighten an astounding eighteen-foot tippet, even in a bit of a breeze.

Sink Rate? I knew you would ask. The wadding takes it down. So I vary that in the design. Generally speaking though, these leaders behave a little like an intermediate line. You can comfortably use one with a dry fly but, like many leaders, it will eventually pull the fly down.



Darrel Martin, micropattern guru and the man largely responsible for resurrecting the furled leader, demonstrates their manufacture to CPS members when he and Taff Price visited South Africa two years ago.

Rather than mess with the design by reducing the amount of wadding, I coat a few of each in Loon Nu-fly Cote or an equivalent floatant, and these versions work beautifully with a dry fly.

When producing a furled leader for nymphing I use sinking compounds, and rub them in during manufacture. The paste gets trapped in the weave, and seems to stay there, particularly if you dress the whole leader very lightly with Loon UV Knot Sense.

All this seems like a lot of work. It is, but it's a lot of fun too, and for the first time I can make cheap leaders that turn over beautifully, and do exactly what I want them to.

Editor's note: *At my request Andrew produced a new-formula furled leader specifically for small stream fanatics. It is designed to meld with ultra light fly lines and the finest of tippets. At one point two metres it facilitates short, accurate casts with small flies and, like other furled leaders I have tried, seems to parachute a fly down very gently. This is probably a result of the increased aerodynamic resistance that a multi-strand leader would have over a single-strand mono leader. Combined with a WF2 Rio Pocket Water fly line, a 5x tippet of little more than a metre and a small, bead head nymph it enables my One Weight Scott fly rods to cast into the teeth of the "Cape Doctor", our notorious South Easter. When Darrel Martin demonstrated the construction of furled leaders during a visit to Cape Town with Taff Price two years ago he used a Dremel tool.*