

The best and the worst of it

by Tom Sutcliffe

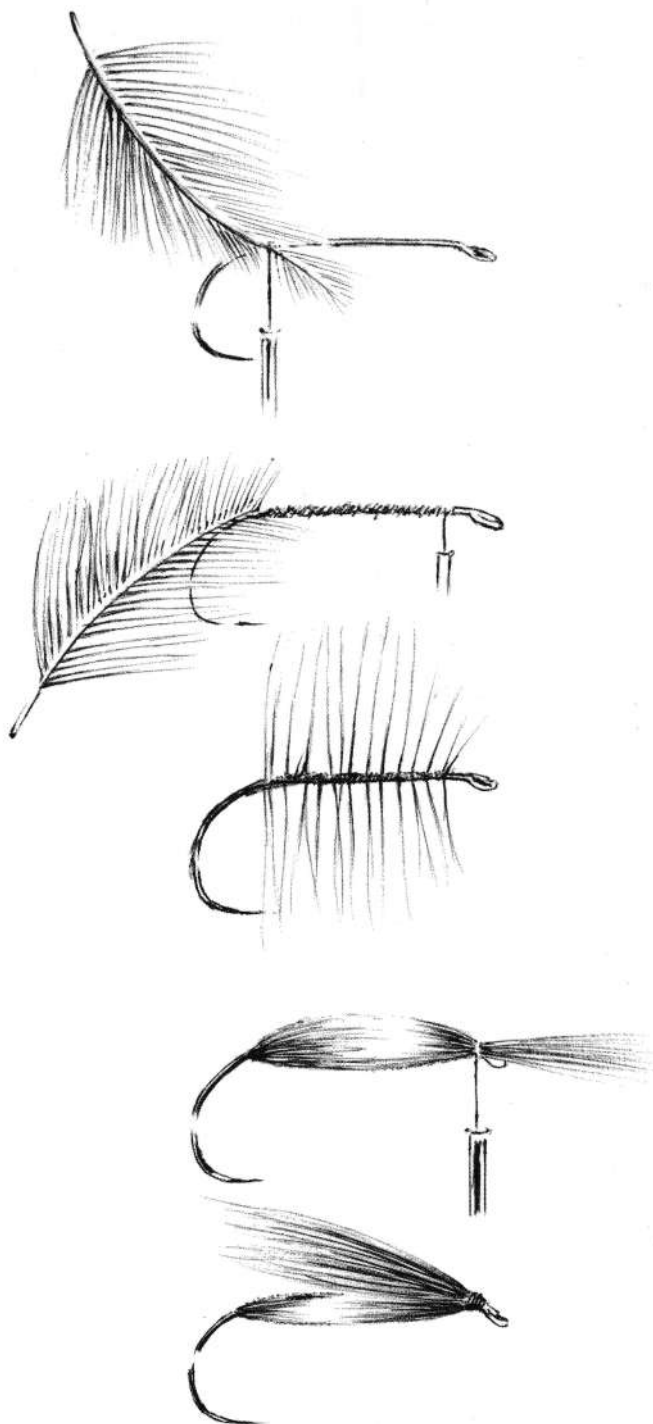
It's not often you get a golden opportunity to put something back into fly fishing that's more meaningful than, say, just helping someone to cast, or showing them how to get into and out of Beat 1 on the Holsloot. I don't mean that's unimportant, but it does nothing much more than help a single individual - and then not in a way that's profound. Being invited to help select the newly-fledged Boland fly-fishing side, and then to coach them for the national championships, was a different kettle of fish entirely. To start with, I selected the first at least partly-representative, fly-fishing side yet chosen to attend such an event (two people of colour, a youth of 13 years old, by name Chase Nicholson, but sadly, no handicapped folk and no women, but it's a start.) Then, secondly, I went with them to the national championships, like lambs to the slaughter it seemed, to help nurse them through the event.

There was a fair amount of trepidation as the young team set off for Maclear, Ugie and Elliot, where the champs were being held. We had a few days to practise on allocated beats of the Mooi, but the river was low and paper-thin. A few fish came out, one or two were lost (did you ever fish a day when that never happened?) and generally the chaps looked on form. Pieter Taljaard even caught a rainbow of 20 inches.

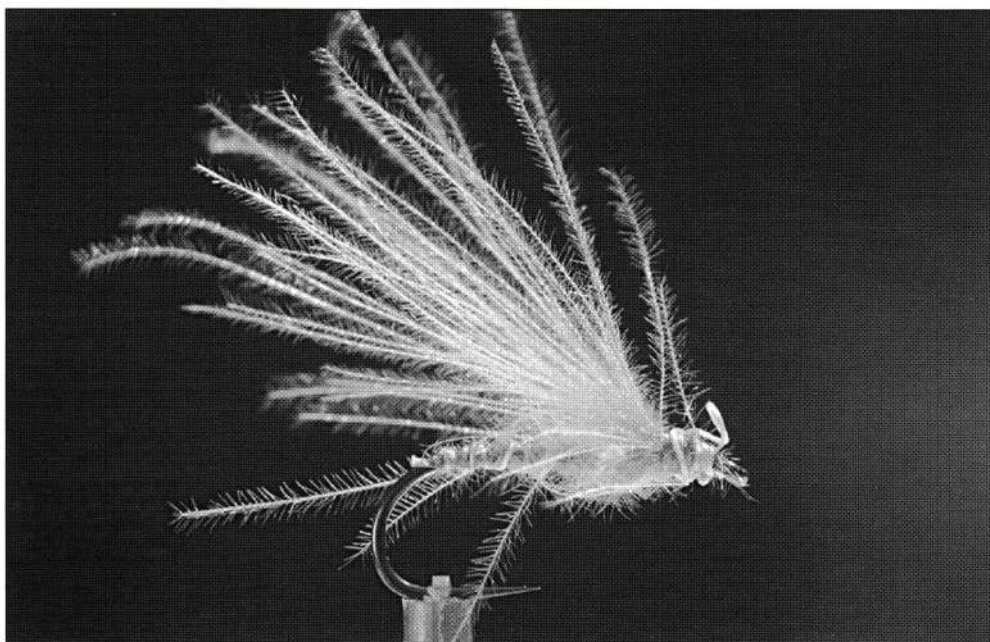
We were staying with Declan and Rolleen Sparks, in their very homely and comfortable B&B in Maclear. Rolleen got used to all the in-house fly tying that went on every evening, to young guys with appetites like Great Whites, and to endless trout talk. Declan's, let it be said, is a fine place for compulsive fly fishers to lodge when in Maclear.

Then on day two of the practice sessions, Edoardo Ferrero, the reigning Italian champion and captain, gave us an on-stream demonstration of how to fly fish efficiently. In a competition, every second of the three hours you get, counts. So just changing flies, in his hands (certainly not mine), takes around ten seconds. He cast well, using a telescopic rod that could go from 6 to 12 feet in the wink of an eye and costs around R5 000, covered every inch of water, moved like a heron, caught a few fish and generally performed just like you would imagine a champion should. It was a great experience watching him.

That evening he set up a vice and gave us a tying demonstration, focusing on patterns well-tested in Europe and highly successful. He tied quickly and neatly and his tying gear, unlike mine, looked ordered and neatly arranged. Everything, down to hare's mask dubbing, was graded for colour and texture - he had fine, dark Hare's dubbings through to light and coarse ones, each spread flat as a pancake in a wide, ziplock plastic bag. I was fascinated with his superglue dispenser, which is a tiny bottle with a small brush, exactly like ladies' nail varnish. He never ties off at the head - just touches a centimetre of thread with glue, wraps it twice, waits three seconds and cuts it off. His Arpo dry fly was a masterpiece, tied with a single, tan, ultra-soft cul de canard goose feather. He wrapped the shank with black silk, tied in the tip of the feather at the bend, covered it in silk to the eye, palmered the cul de canard up the shank and tied it off the stem at the head of the fly. Then he pulled all the palmered feathers forward, wrapped them at the head, then bent them back over the shank as a wing. It's a caddis really, and he uses no floatant on it. He just intermittently dries the fly in soft tissue paper.



The Arpo, body and wing made from the same feather.



The Arpo, like all classic and enduring patterns, a simple design comprising two materials, thread and a single CDC plume.



Team manager and coach, Tom Sutcliffe with the Western Province team at the national trials in Maclear.



"The Maestro". Edoardo Ferrero enjoys the delights of "Paradiso" and celebrates with a brown trout caught in a Maclear dam.

I'm not going to go into the actual competition in any detail, save to say you couldn't have cut the tension with a scalpel it was so thick. Rather, I'll get to the last evening, when the Boland side, all smartly kitted out in their black blazers and khaki pants, met for a gala function to hear the results. I was privy to the outcomes ahead of the event, being a national selector, but they weren't, and they were a touch anxious. In the end, they learned Boland had come in fourth, out of the 14 teams that entered, behind Western Province and Northwest, and separated from them by, believe it or not, only a single point. To cap it, they'd got no less than three fellows in the top 20 squad that meet for a play-off to pick the six-member Protea side to take on the world in Slovakia come September next year. There was mayhem and merriment, plenty of back-slapping and a few ales were consumed before that evening ran to a close. When the speeches and presentations were over and we were into the dinner, someone noticed that Chad Nicholson was sound asleep, his head resting quietly on the dinner table. I think it had all been a little too much for him, but the youngster had acquitted himself well, and fought bravely every inch of the way.

I took Edoardo to some mountain lakes I know, up near the Pitseng, on one of those days when the sky is a big blue dome, when birds were out, swooping swallows skimming the water, thermal-hunting raptors floating overhead. The limpid lakes sparkled with sunlight and Edoardo hit into more big, fat, hungry trout than he ever believed existed on the Planet Earth - browns as long as your arm, rainbows with flanks like sides of pork. Over lunch he lifted his head to the heavens and shouted "Paradiso" and talked endlessly about coming back to South Africa. I don't know how many fish over five pounds he caught that day, but I'd settle for around a dozen. "Better than a poke in the eye with a blunt stick, hey Maestro," I said as we were packing up the truck, and he caught the humour in it. "You have a world-class fly fishing here in this part of South Africa," he said on a more serious note. I agreed. "But wait until you see the Elandspad," I told him.

That done, I slipped across the mountains to fish with my old pal Fred Steynberg, but the rivers there were even thinner than in Maclear. On a cold day we wandered down the Langkloof looking for some flow, found little, caught one fish. The rocks were like soap and in a little thread of water I slipped and in one quick second buried my brand-new, state-of-the-art Tamron 28 - 300 mm lens and Fred's camera under water. The fancy new Canon I had just got in from the States had packed up two days into the champs and Fred kindly loaned me his. The lens was muddy and my thumb was partially dislocated. The thumb never worried me, but the lens and Fred's camera did. We got out the hair drier and saved Fred's equipment, but my lens looked cooked. I gave the rest of the fishing best and raced the lens down to Cape Town the next day. We're talking more than just a few grand's worth of equipment here, so I was a worried man. By the time Dave Rodseth, a fly fishing hand-surgeon, had got my thumb fixed firmly into a neat plastic cast, the camera folk called to say the lens had been salvaged. As for my new Canon, I still await the outcome. Seems the more fancy things get, the less they're understood by those who profess to know about them. Ed Herbst and I have decided to look out for a couple of cheap, second-hand, no-frill SLRs, like the old Pentax I once owned, so that we can travel the rivers in the peaceful knowledge that if the whole lot goes in, well, who cares?

