GREATEST REELMAKERS

It's a simple statement of fact that the world's finest reels are made by Stanley Bogdan and Bob McChristian. A short visit into their private worlds shows why their reels have become the standard the world over.

n an age of assembly line hamburgers, engineered obsolescence and general shoddy workmanship, it's nice to know that the finest reels in the world are made in the United States. There is no chest thumping involved here. It is just a simple statement of fact.

The pinnacle of the reel maker's art is represented today by fly reels crafted by Stanley Bogdan, Nashua, New Hampshire, and Bob McChristian, Coral Gables, Florida.

The heart of what we're dealing with is total dedication to quality or, put another way, plain hard work. Bob McChristian sums it up like this:

The anodized finish on one of McChristian's Seamaster rates 9 out of a possible 10 on the Mohs' hardness scale. Diamonds rate 10.

"I don't claim I'm doing something someone else couldn't, but to do it a person would have to put in the number of hours I do." Normally he works six days and five nights, often doing the polishing on Sundays when his regular man can't. As with Bogdan, there's not a phase of the operation he doesn't control.

"The only thing about my reel that's unique," says Stan Bogdan, "is that it's handmade. Who makes handmade products anymore?"

McChristian's Seamaster and the S.E. Bogdan reels are built from raw stock by their designers. From spools and frames to pawls, bushings and screws almost all parts are machined in each man's shop.

It is almost unheard of for a person to become a successful manufacturer today without adopting mass-production methods. To do without the assembly line and still make a good living requires skill and a unique personality. Bogdan and McChristian have both. They are fiercely individualistic and justifiably proud of their reels. This short visit into the private world of these great craftsmen will give you some idea why their products have become the standard the world over.

Back in the days when pretty girls in Havana smiled a lot and rum and conversation flowed freely, the father of a friend of mine used to make regular trips from Cuba to Miami with an interpreter just to buy Seamaster reels. He thought that highly of them. Bob McChristian was easy to find then. Fishermen at Miami Beach knew him as Captain Mack, a former charter-boat skipper and top Eastern Airlines executive who had chucked it all to open the most aggressive tackle shop on the beach. Why?

"I saw how the big corporate machine sucked the good out of you for 25 or 30 years, then turns you out to pasture before it had to give you a pension," Mack says.

Like everything else he tried, the tackle shop was a success, but McChristian wanted more. There followed a series of tackle innovations, including a superior spinning reel 15 years ahead of its time and eventually discontinued.

"Today its gears alone would retail for \$60," says Mack, whose machinist know-how he credits to his father.

McChristian turned to designing fly reels after a competitor's reel failed one too many times on the big-shouldered tarpon of Government Cut. The Brand X reel now rests on the bottom of that inlet.

"I also have various make spinning reels scattered on the bottom up and down the Florida coast," says the designer who reports that he filled 37 trash cans developing the fly reel that started it all. "Really it was two solid years of work before I knew when I left the dock that if anything went wrong it would not be the reel."

Field-testing by day and refining over and over by night or in the early mornings, Mack built what he calls the perfect anti-reverse (slip-clutch) fly reel. Today there are three anti-reverse reels and five direct-drive reels in his line.







Bob McChristian of Coral Gables, Florida, works five days and six nights each week handcrafting the prized Seamaster reels. Only a few parts are not machined in his shop. Originally the former charterboat skipper designed spinning reels; now he spends his time crafting fly reels.

"Word started getting out," says Mack. "I sold 10, 15 then 20 reels at a time. It was a total loss. Even if I'd sold 500 reels of one model then, I would've been unable to eat." McChristian decided there was only one way to change that.

losing his retail operation, he set up a machine shop and took on difficult subcontracting assignments while building up sales of the fly reel. Twenty-five years after building his first fly reel in Miami, Captain Mack is a little more difficult to find in his Coral Gables shop-cumsales office. There is no sign out. The front door is locked and no one bothers to knock. You find your way through a rear bay, past a trailer-bound skiff holding reel parts, into the shop clutter of well-used machinery wedged back to back for lack of space. There is one more door to the inner sanctum with a sign over it that says Keep Out.

How do you order a reel in this place? It depends. If Mack is deep into lathe work or in a ferocious mood, it might be best to call again. If your timing is right, you might be ushered past the Keep Out sign, past the old gray office desk and the glass showcase stacked with photos of the angling famous and not-so-famous with their incredible catches from around the world taken on Seamaster reels. Then if you must convince yourself once more that you need to spend all that money for a fly reel, Mack will push aside the memorabilia, unroll a tattered black velour cloth and, under the harsh fluorescent lights, polishing lovingly with a small circular motion, display one of his creations.

No jewel cushioned on black velvet at Tiffany's could have more allure. You will be hopelessly lost even before you ask Mack what, besides its beauty, makes this the reel of reels, the one that you should have. When you ask he will tell you.

"The Seamaster was designed to have the lightest weight with the greatest line capacity," says Mack. "Outside, it has the finest finish available. Inside, we do a lot of things. For example, we use double sealed instrument ball bearings. I can free the spool from the drag, hit the handle and drink a whole can of beer before the spool stops spinning. I've won a lot of free beers that way. And our drag is superior. I use a cork system. A lot of people have copied us, but cheaply. They use poor cork and Elmer's glue. Our drag is of large diameter and the finest cork. It's phenolic bonded under pressure, under heat, the way brake linings are put on cars.

"There's virtually no breakaway torque (starting drag) problem. We can set this drag for 10 pounds, run off line, sit the reel down and talk for a while. When we go back and run off line again, there'll still be 10 pounds of drag. You only need to turn the control slightly to adjust the drag. Set it to 3 pounds then turn the control just a half a turn and you'll be up to 7½ pounds. That's 40 percent more than anybody fishes with. The human wrist can turn almost 180°, so you can see the drag range instantly available. I've never replaced a drag in 25 years. I've never replaced a screw in 25 years."

The anodized finish on a Seamaster is 9 out of a possi-

ble 10 on the Mohs' scale. Diamonds rate 10. Mack gives a graphic demonstration of what this means. Using a file, he scores a stainless steel rod. The same file leaves not a scratch on the reel spool.

"Finish is not just for looks," says McChristian. "If a finish wears off, aluminum particles can break free. Those particles become contaminants that go into your drag surface. If you lived to be 1,000 you couldn't go through this finish of ours."

You could go on with technical descriptions singing the Seamaster's praises, but what about availability? The grapevine has it that anglers from Australia to Saudi Arabia are waiting to buy these reels.

Says Mack, "If we're making a run of a particular reel and your order comes in for that model, we might get you a reel in 10 days to two weeks. Otherwise it might take seven months. If there's some holdup, we just return your check which we don't deposit until a reel is ready anyway. Even so, we don't get cancellations. We've had to return checks and people just send them right back."

A lot of would-be customers have learned the hard way that pressuring McChristian for a reel doesn't work. Lefty Kreh, OUTDOOR LIFE's saltwater fishing editor, tells the tale of a money-arrogant guy who swaggered into Mack's shop and slapped down \$600 for two reels. That was back in the days when two of the Seamasters cost \$260. Says Lefty, "Mack just took hold of the guy by the seat of the pants and the shirt collar, and eased him outside on his toenails, and told him not to come back. He didn't either. Mack would rather sell a reel to somebody who is really a fisherman and has saved up for a reel."

Mack builds models to handle everything from salmon and steelhead to big billfish. Depending on the model, the Seamasters cost from \$270 to \$310. They are worth every penny of it, and once you see one you will not rest until you have it. My flattened checking account is a constant reminder of the fact.

On some salmon rivers it is totally unthinkable to show up without a Bogdan reel.

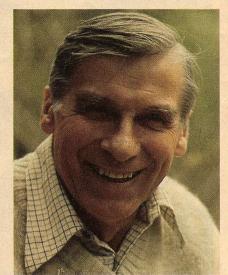
Some years ago a New Hampshire newspaper publisher asked Stanley Bogdan if it would be all right to send over a photographer and reporter to interview him.

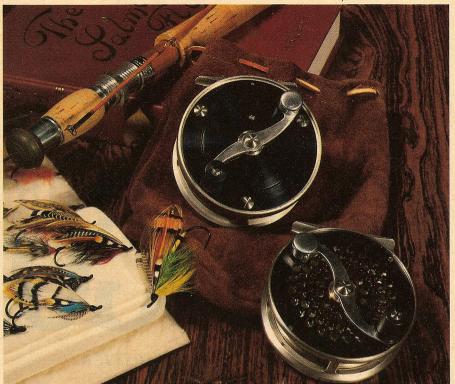
"How'd you know about me?" asked Bogdan, who has lived more than 60 years in New Hampshire without getting any local publicity. The publisher, it turns out, had been talking with one of Bogdan's customers in a distant state.

"They called the story 'Stanley Who?" "says Bogdan. "When it appeared my neighbor sent me a letter. He said, 'after living next door to you for 15 years I finally know what you do." Home in Nashua nobody knows who I am and could care less." Where salmon, and lately trout, are concerned, however, the name Bogdan is sy-

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Stanley Bogdan still uses the same 17th century methods he practiced when he began his craft 37 years ago. He's working less now that son Steve is apprenticing in the Bogdan's Nashua, New Hampshire, shop. The price for their time and workmanship ranges from \$198 to \$264 per reel.







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"Help me lift him to his side so's I can get his insides out," Uncle Rich told me. The knife made paper-ripping sounds as he worked. I saw the intestines spill onto the ground.

"That's about all I can do in the woods. I'll go back to the house for the truck. You stay with the dogs and keep 'em off the meat. But first I'll make your first deer legal. Kneel down, so I can do it right."

I did. The sun was gone; only traces

of light remained.

It wasn't sticky and it wasn't salty like I had been told it was. Uncle Rich scopped blood with his cupped hands from the deer's open cavity and annointed my head twice.

He wiped his hands dry with tuffs of broomstraw.

I looked up at him and he looked down and said, "You been blooded properly. You are a deer hunter."

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nonymous with fishing.

On the rivers of the West Coast of Canada and the United States, and on the Northeast's Atlantic salmon rivers, Bogdan is well-known. Here he fishes wih customer friends who number among the world's wealthiest industrialists and members of old-line families. On some salmon rivers it is totally unthinkable to show up without a Bogdan reel. Attaining such prestige with a product is the result of years of dedication.

"I've been making reels for 37 years now," Bogdan says. "I haven't changed the techniques. I'm still using 17th century methods but now I work just 60 hours a week. That's back from 80 hours because my son Steve now works with me."

Typical of Bogdan's old-world style of manufacturing, his son served an apprenticeship for five years during which he made only parts. The story goes that Stan never showed Steven how to make the last couple of pieces so he would not be tempted to assemble the reel on his own.

One evening Steve watched Bogdan's close friend Bill Hunter converting a reel from left to right-hand-wind at Hunter's tackle shop. Steve watched in disbelief, then said, "He won't let me do that." Two days later Steve called to tell Hunter that Stan had finally let him assemble a reel. As the final concession to the 20th century, Bogdan senior is having real blueprints made of his reel and its parts. Until 1980 all specifications were carried either on scraps of paper or in Bogdan's head.

Like McChristian, Stan Bogdan was trained as a machinist. He also was a trout fisherman and had a dream of one day fishing for Atlantic salmon. Stan says it all started back in 1943 when he built for himself what he thought was a salmon reel. He took it to a Boston sportsmen's show where it was seen by Julian Crandall, president of the old Ashaway Line and Twine Company, then a top factor in flyfishing.

"Julian let me have it right between the eyes," says Bogdan. "He told me everything that was wrong with my reel." Three months later Bogdan had completed a new model incorporating Crandall's advice. Through Crandall, Stan met John Olin, the peppery-tempered president of the Olin-Mathieson Company. Together, Bogdan and Olin created a new brake system, improving the reel still further.

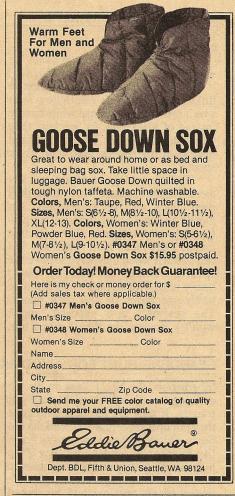
Olin was so enthused with the new salmon reel that he contacted the prestigious old company of Abercrombie & Fitch. Suddenly Bogdan had an order for 40 reels. Today Stan Bogdan lists among his customers such widely diverse personages as Ted Williams and the Duke of Wellington.

The product itself emanates from walk-up space in downtown Nashua, New Hampshire. Bogdan's tiny shop glitters with metal filings, unfinished reels and antique machinery that belies the quality of work he does with it.

"Î have \$440 invested in machinery here," says Stanley. "Why should I spend more if it does the job?" A visitor to the shop will see items such as the antique drill press run by an ancient washing-machine motor, and the stock of used cloth-buffing wheels broken in by Bill Hunter who discards them after buffing fly vises.

The reels themselves have more parts than have the reels made by Bob McChristian. Bogdan made his name with 2-to-1 retrieve ratio reels designed to pick up line fast when used in fishing a salmon river. Today he makes several single-action models as well as the multipliers. There are 12 basic models in his line, and three others are being developed. Stan's reels range from \$198 to \$264, and if you order one early in the year you might get it for Christmas. The drag system consists of Delrin shoes that press against a stainless steel drum. Rather than using a continuous drag control, Bogdan has a 10-position knob that helps you to see at a glance how your drag is set. The gears and coil springs are the only parts not produced in the Bogdan shop.

What gives Stan continuing fits are customer demands that he make





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 changes in the reels.

"Salmon anglers are as vain as women with a new hat," says Bogdan. "They all want something different, a little unique. There's one fellow who won't rest until I get him a white handle instead of black one. In Scotland they want the reels all black anodized instead of my regular gold with black spools.

"The latest thing is perforations. It's the British influence. They think they need holes all over their reels. It's mostly psychological because the perforations don't lighten the reels that much. They mean more work too. It's bad enough when they have to have the spool perforated, but one guy wasn't happy until I made him a reel that also had perforations on the back plates. The gearing's now exposed, and I won't guarantee the reel. I asked him

what he's going to do if he gets some grit in there, and he told me he puts the reel in flowing water to purify it. He's nuts."

Lately Stan's demanding customers won't rest until they have a Bogdan trout reel. They want not only steelhead reels, but smaller mills designed for smaller trout.

"I ask them why they don't put the line in their pockets and save money," Bogdan says. "They say it's aesthetics. Why anybody would want a handmade trout reel just to hold line is beyond me. It's some kind of ego trip.

trip.

"I won't sell a reel to everybody, either. I refused one order from a guy who came in with his wife and two children. I knew he was going to have to scrape together the money and deprive his family to buy it. Another time a kid

came in to order a trout reel, and I told him I wouldn't make it until he brought his father in. Well, he did, and his father told me I did business some kind of strange way. I do too. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't taking money that was earmarked for the kid's education. When I got that assurance I built the reel. The kid was in here every week for a month until I finished it. I think he sleeps with the thing."

Beyond all else it is salmon fishing and it's memories that are dearest to Bogdan's heart. Wes Jordan, the famous Orvis rod builder, took Stan on

his first salmon trip.

"For years I wanted an Atlantic so bad I could taste it," Bogdan says. "Just before we left on that first trip we got word that the water was very low, so we took low-water flies. When we arrived it began raining, and the river

SEABORNE HUNT FOR A KODIAK continued from page 53

hibernation, the No. 1 item on his list of things to do is look up his old girl friends. If they are mothers with cubs they put up a great fuss and send the old boy packing. Sows know hungry boars like to snack on tender cubs. But if the lady has no family and is in a romantic mood, the boar pays court and, like males of all species, lets his guard down. This makes him easier to hunt because two bears are easier to spot than one, and his attentions are on the sow. This doesn't mean the hunting is a pushover. The sow is as wary as ever and as nervous as a cow on ice.

Later in the day we came across three more browns that were on the crest of a steep hogback that ran up a mountain at about a 45 to 60° angle. They were big, playful cubs, probably on their own for the first time. One was snoozing on a grassy ledge, another was doing a balancing act on a log, while the third was seeing how much damage he could do to an alder thicket. From a range of no more than 500 yards, I was amazed to see how completely the brush-busting bear disappeared when he stepped into the thin edge of the alders. Chief said that hunters probably don't see more than one out of 100 bears in a given area. I'm inclined to agree.

The great browns weigh up to 1,650 pounds or so, but as trophies only the skull measurements are of interest for record-book purposes. Hunters, though, like a bear that is big in the body and use the squared measurements of the hide for comparisons. The hide is measured from nose to tip of the tail and then from claw tip to claw tip of the forelegs. The two figures are added and then divided by two. The average

brown bear taken these days probably square in the 8-foot range. A 9-footer is a whopper, and a 10-footer is something to dream about.

Fifteen of the 20 top-ranking browns in the Boone and Crockett record book were taken on Kodiak Island. Of these 13 have been killed since 1950, so chances of taking a record-book brown are still very good. It's a lot tougher to judge a bear than, say, a deer or a sheep. The bigger a bear grows in body size, the smaller his head appears.

Around noon of the third day, seas were high, so we headed for shelter and tied up at a huge cannery complex. The place was deserted except for a friendly watchdog and a watchman who was glad to have company. He'd been seeing bears, he told us, especially around the dry dock. The wooden boat storage racks and launching ways were lubricated with a grease that the bears considered a delicacy. Later, when we stopped by the racks, I saw what the giant bears can do to a 12-inch beam for grease. One outside corner was all torn away.

Late on the fourth day Brent spotted two good-size bears on a grassy ledge about a quarter mile inland. We beached the skiff about half a mile downwind, skirted a marsh and climbed about 1,000 feet above the bears, hoping to stalk them from above. Our plan went sour about a third of the way up the mountain when we ran into waist-deep snow. After exhausting ourselves trying to wade through the drifts, we dropped below the snowfield and tried a frontal assault.

The bears were no longer in the open and apparently had gone into a thick

alder stand below the ledge. Hopes of a fancy stalk were shot but since we were already there, we decided to go into the cover and flush them, assuming that they were willing to be flushed.

We crawled through an alder jungle so thick that a bear 10 feet away would have been completely hidden. After a while we gave it up and returned to the boat. Al, who had a good view of the whole affair said that when we went into the alder thicket the bears went out the other side. We had been within 30 yards of the big browns.

On the ninth day we took duffel and groceries aboard the *Sitka* so that we could stay aboard that night instead of returning to camp. It would save a lot of hunting time. On the ninth day of a 10-day hunt everyone is anxious.

That morning we spotted a few bears on the high slopes, but they were small. About noon we pulled into the neck of a long inlet, dropped the hook, and settled down to glass the hills. I had just blocked off a square of mountainside to glass when Brent said: "I can't believe it, I can't believe it," he said and pointed at the distant shore.

Two bears, big bears, were strolling along the beach and poking at each other like a couple of playful cubs. The smaller one was obviously a sow; the other was massive and had the deep mahogany coloration of an old boar.

It looked good, but it's the seemingly easy stalks that go sour. Very few words were spoken while we loaded our gear into the skiff and cast off.

Our first problem was how to cross the inlet without being seen or spooking the bears with the sound of the motor. We hoped that the big boat would hold their attention and took the rose so much we couldn't get near the banks. There was just one small area where there was any chance at all. They let me fish it, and I hooked up. I played that fish with the greatest care. No one wanted to tail it. Wes wouldn't touch it for fear he'd lose it-my first fish. Finally Dr. Fredette from the village of Matane snapped the tailer around it. And when he pulled that out in a great arc and we had it, oh Lord, I sat on the bank and cried like a baby. And I'm not ashamed to admit it. My first spring salmon. It was the fulfillment of a dream. To me a salmon is what a fish should look like. There's all the mystery of it going out into the deep sea and returning. It's not like a fish that's in a pond and always there. It's just a fascinating creature, and so is the fishing for it. It's my whole life.'

Bogdan's life is not a continuous

series of golden angling experiences, however. When he has been away from the river a long time, the monotony of routine work can eat away at him as well as anyone. He tells it like this: "You'll have a day when you're dragging, when you wish you never were in this business. Then in the evening you'll get a call from a guy in the Midwest who tells you he's just come back from the Matapedia where the only salmon caught all week was his-on your reel. And that makes it all right again. You've pleased someone, and in the process you've pleased yourself. So you do the best you can and wait to get an invitation to go fishing. Then you come home and start over again where nobody knows you. The other day my wife was looking at a \$39 reel in a showcase. She asked me, 'Is that yours?' '

skiff back the way we had come into the inlet. We kept close to the shore and moved more or less away from the bears. When we were a mile or so down the inlet, we turned toward the shore and beached about a mile downwind of the bears. It took 20 minutes, and during the last 10 minutes the bears were out of sight behind the curving shoreline. Would they still be there?

The shore was actually a bench carved into the side of a mountain by tidal erosion. I had hoped that we would be able to stalk the bears along the shore, but it was impossible because of a sheer cliff that sliced down into the water between us and the bears. We had to go back a way and

climb above the cliff.

Climbing was mainly a matter of hauling ourselves up hand and over hand, but after about 300 yards we hit a narrow deer trail that allowed us to move along without too much danger of sliding back down. By easing along the deer trail, we were able to get directly above the place where we had last seen the bears. If they were still there, they were hidden below a steep wall some 20 feet high. Above that was a flat bench about 200 yards wide covered with dense brush. From the top of the bench we could see 200 or 300 yards of shoreline. Our dilemma was that if the bears moved at all, they were probably to one side or the other or in the cover above the shore. And if they were in the cover they would spook and run or charge at very close range if we came down for a look over the edge. It was also possible that they were still on the shore. A stalk that had looked relatively simple had become very complicated.

Munching raisins to replace the energy we'd burned scrambling up the mountain, Brent and I had a whispered conference. If the bears had already gone, there was little hope of finding them again. If they were still on the shore below the bluff, I'd have the best chance for a clear shot by waiting them out. There was a semicircle of open ground that they would have to cross if they came uphill. My guess was that if they headed up the mountain they would follow a shallow draw about 100 yards to our left, so I twisted around to a sitting position that favored a shot in that direction.

Our nagging concern was time. A week earlier I would have gladly waited for the bears, but now we were gambling against time with no assurance that the bears were still on the shore. It had been more than an hour since we last saw them. Had they stayed that long on a 200-foot strip of open shore?

It was a bright day, the best of the trip, and a breeze was wafting down the inlet. Across the inlet the Sitka bobbed like a toy boat. Al was no doubt watching through the spotting scope, and it was tantalizing to realize that he probably knew where the bears were.

Brent made short reconnaissances to either side of my position, hoping the added angle would let him see far enough behind the bench to spot the bears, but he saw nothing.

'Let's move farther to the left," he whispered. "If they come up, they are almost sure to follow that draw, and we'll be a lot closer.

I agreed, but moving meant passing through a small but thick stand of alders, so we moved one at a time. One



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