

Test Driving the Tega Fantasy Snorkel

BY REINHARD KARGL

“The only pen you fill without wiping the point” gets a makeover.



Above—vintage 1950s Sheaffer Snorkel advertisement; current Tega Pen Company Fantasy Snorkel fountain pens with vintage Snorkel nibs and new acrylic or translucent bodies with gold or silver accents.

Are'n't all of us fountain pen enthusiasts a little eccentric? We take pleasure in the unusual and seek out the extraordinary. What could be more so than Sheaffer's historic TM ("Thin Model") Snorkel? After all, these pens feature the most complicated filling system ever invented! Deploy the filler tube from underneath the nib, and watch the jaws of pen novices drop.

Sheaffer's famed Snorkels haven't been made since 1959 (or, according to some sources, perhaps for a few more years in Australia). This makes even the youngest members of the species about six decades old. It also means that much of what is found in the wild today requires careful restoration.

What if this filling system was invented today? What would a brand new Snorkel look like? How would it perform?

We are in luck, because John Bedard not only has the answers but also the pens. In his workshop in Tega Cay, South Carolina, he painstakingly installs restored vintage Snorkel nibs and mechanisms in individually-made, new exteriors. The result is a bespoke Snorkel of unparalleled finesse, far superior to the original production. What started as a retirement hobby for Bedard created such a buzz that now he can barely meet the demand.

Before we get into the details of John Bedard's so-named "Fantasy Snorkel," we first need to understand the design's concept and history. After the introduction of the Parker 51 in 1941, other pen makers were struggling to keep up. Parker's advertising slogan, "The World's Most Wanted Pen", was no exaggeration, as it outsold its competitors by leaps and bounds.

The Sheaffer Pen Company decided it needed to offer a similarly streamlined, minimalistic design but with an attention-getting mechanism. The market for fountain pens was beginning to dwindle by the early 1950s, as ballpoint pens were quickly developing a reputation for being cleaner and more convenient than messing with the old ink bottles. Pen historian and *Pen World* Contributor Richard Binder wrote that the "snorkel system was a last-ditch attempt to fight the onslaught of the ballpoint pen, whose great advantage lay in its convenience: no 'dunk' filling, reliable writing, and a long write-out."



Far left—translucent Fantasy Snorkel cap and Triumph 14 karat gold nib.
Top to bottom—clear demonstrator ribbon fountain pen with Triumph nib;
translucent Ribbon Fantasy Snorkels in Vibrant Red with stainless steel nib,
Blue Sky with stainless steel nib, Tangerine with Triumph nib, and Brown
Smoke with 14 karat gold bicolor nib.



The ingenious idea behind the snorkel filler is that its tip never needs to be immersed in ink. Instead, a deployable filling tube sucks in ink “like sippin’ soda thru a straw”, as Sheaffer advertised it, together with the motto, “End Dunk Filling”. “The only pen you fill without wiping the point”, Sheaffer ephemera gushed. The “finest pen ever created”. And it was thrifty, as every last drop of ink could be evacuated from the bottle.

But the “Easiest Pen In The World To Fill” brought convenience at the expense of enormous mechanical complexity. As Bedard puts it, “Eighteen different finely tuned components must all work in perfect harmony. I am still undecided as to whether the engineer that designed this filling system received a large bonus or got fired!”

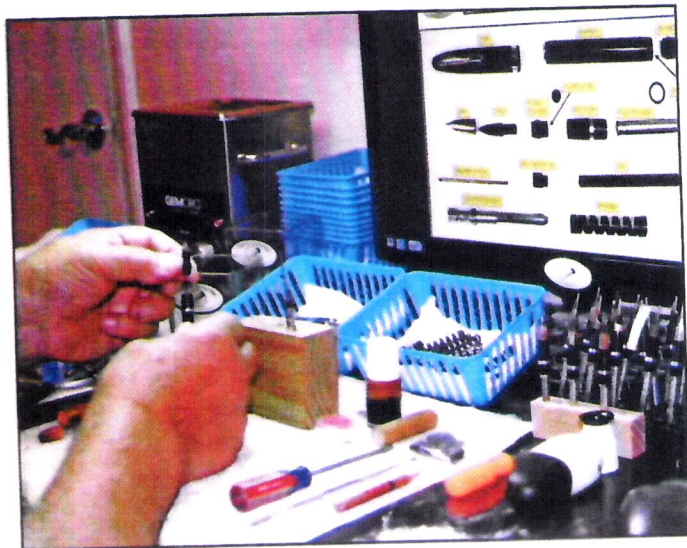
The snorkel filling system relies on airtight seals for proper air pressure and vacuum, which means the components must fit together with great precision. If all is well and parts play together nicely, the snorkel filler is considered very reliable and dependable.

Born and raised in the Bronx, New York, Bedard received his education in business and finance but found his calling in the automotive sector. He enjoyed tinkering with race cars, tuning and rebuilding engines, doing body and paint work. Over time, he was rebuilding all kinds of car parts—water pumps, calipers, carburetors, brake components, drive axles, and even whole cars. This is also how he began to work with CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machining.





Above, left to right—Fantasy Snorkel acrylic fountain pens in Fantasy Black and White Ribbon, Pure White, Fantasy Blue, Fantasy Gold, Fantasy Brown Ribbon, and Deep Green.
Below—Bedard polishing a Fantasy Snorkel cap; Bedard's assembly area.



After selling his company and retiring to a scenic lakeside region of South Carolina, Bedard needed a hobby. It was his friend and mentor Gary Lehrer, a well-known figure in the pen community, who first suggested he build a modern Snorkel. Bedard acquired several vintage models and began to ponder the preferences of today's market. For one, the original models were too thin. And they only came in a limited range of solid colors. Initially, between 1952 and 1959, Sheaffer made just six common colors, with nine additional choices added in the years after 1956.

Using his vintage Snorkels, Bedard reverse-engineered the entire pen. It took years to figure out the exact inner dimensions and workings of all parts and to calculate the internal measurements, proper compression factors, and other parameters. Much of it was trial and error. Bedard paid attention to every minute detail including thermal expansion and contraction of the different materials. To improve the o-ring, he worked with a specialist to find a more durable, modern silicone replacement part. And he sought to improve the balance and handling of the pen.

The original barrels were mass produced by injection molding—not a cost-effective process for small scale production. Here, a different barrel material and process were needed to achieve the precision necessary for the whole system to function, but at a reasonable cost. Bedard settled on Poly(methyl methacrylate), better known as acrylic. This material offers endless colors and semi-translucent structures. The major external parts are CNC machined. Threads are precision cut, parts are hand fitted, and the exterior undergoes a five-step wet-sanding and polishing process. Caps and barrels are individually vacuum tested to ensure a tight seal.



Above—Fantasy Snorkels in Radiant Red, Mandarin Yellow, light blue and beige, beige and purple swirl, Fantasy Gold Ribbon, and Fantasy Deep Blue Swirl. Right—vintage Sheaffer Snorkel advertisement.

The interior of the Fantasy Snorkel is all vintage. “If it wasn’t made in the 1950s,” Bedard says, “I don’t have it.” The process begins by meticulous inspection and restoration of all the parts. Bladders are replaced, and nibs are reconditioned and tuned.

Bedard sells his creations online and at pen shows. This is where customers can try different pens, and Bedard can fine tune them to the buyer’s wishes on the spot. (Pen shows attended by John Bedard and his wife are posted on the Fantasy Snorkel web site). Online, it is also possible to choose from a wide range of nibs, nib styles, acrylics, and different trim options. Because each pen is assembled and finished by hand, customer wishes can be taken into account, resulting in far greater variety than the original Sheaffer Snorkel options.

For this article, Bedard entrusted me with a test pen. It came in a high quality presentation box displaying the pen sleeping on luxurious white satin. Once it arises from its bed, the pen is stunning. The acrylic has a luxurious, luminous texture with just enough translucency to reveal the material’s internal patterns. Bedard recommends Parker Quink or Waterman inks, but I tested it with blue/black Pelikan 4001.

Careful when filling: it is essential to follow the instructions. This also involves waiting with patience for about seven seconds. The writing experience proved superb. The open 14 karat gold medium nib had moderate flex and performed very smoothly, without rough spots at any angle—a sign of the expert care it received. The Fantasy Snorkel body is both wider and heavier than the vintage body. It feels very solid, with the center of gravity right in the middle of the unposted barrel and shifting to two-thirds up the barrel when posted. Extending and retracting the actual snorkel was smooth as butter, the mechanism a joy to operate. Everything fit together with the exact precision of a fine mechanical watch, and the finish was astounding. Flawless in every way!

After trying it out for myself, I am convinced that John Bedard not only succeeded in his goal, but exceeded the original Sheaffer Snorkel in all objective quality criteria. I suspect he won’t be idling in retirement any time soon.

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