



# OPST AND THE MICRO SPEY REVOLUTION

Review and photos  
by Brian Clark



OLYMPIC PENINSULA SKAGIT TACTICS

Buckle up, because there's a lot to unpack here. Let's start with some terminology and geography: two hands, two rivers, three regions, and three styles – Spey, Scandi, Skagit.

### Two Hands

Most of what we'll discuss in this piece relates to various styles of two-handed fly casting done with a double-handed fly rod. Except when it doesn't.

### Two Rivers

Spey and Skagit are rivers: the River Spey rises from Loch Spey in Scotland and flows mostly northeast into the North Sea; the Skagit River starts in British Columbia and meanders through Washington before dropping into Puget Sound.

### Three Regions

We've just identified two of the three regions: Scotland and the Pacific Northwest. Predictably, "Scandi" refers to Scandinavia, especially Norway and Iceland, and some might stretch it to include the Baltics.

These three regions have several important things in common: all have large, wide, fast rivers which have historically hosted healthy runs of salmon and/or steelhead. Many of these rivers are deep and powerful, so it's necessary to fish them from close to the bank – except that in many cases, the banks are densely lined with trees. Also, all three regions are notorious for winter weather capable of deterring most casual anglers. Finally, all three have, at various times, been positively infested with some of the most hardcore fly anglers on the planet, single-minded obsessives who go to extreme lengths to catch these fish. Or at least cast to them. Repeatedly. Over and over. Again and again. In miserable weather. They're clearly insane.

Naturally, I've idolized those stubborn, visionary fools for decades. They've invented something very special.

### Three Styles

Although some folks use "Spey" as an umbrella term referring to any and all casting done with a double-handed rod and/or a cast which never puts the fly behind the angler (courtesy of an "anchor" and a "D" loop), there's a great deal of nuance under the surface. This is where the topic gets deep and contentious, but I'm only going to gloss through the highlights since most of it isn't germane to the topic at hand (for instance, we're ignoring Switch rods here).

These three distinct styles are defined more by the line tapers than the rods (or even some of the casts), so the terms below refer to the sub-style which pairs with a particular type of line:

- *Traditional Spey*: in general, these are longer-belly integrated lines (as opposed to those with modular "head" sections, more below) which enable the caster to pick up more line off the water without stripping all the way into the head section. Some purists still favor this style, but it's not very popular anymore. That's partly because long heads (over 40-70ft / 12-21m) can be relatively challenging to manage gracefully, but also because it favors light and elegant but traditional and less versatile salmon flies rather than sinking lines or weighted flies. The other two styles have gained considerable traction over the past few decades.
- *Scandi*: these lines have shorter head sections than Traditional Spey lines, and those heads usually attach to the running line with a loop-to-loop system rather than being integrated. The shorter heads (under 40ft / 12m, give or take) are easier for most people to handle than Traditional Spey lines, but they still aren't ideal for throwing sinking tips or heavy flies.
- *Skagit*: now we're getting to the meat of this piece, literally. The Skagit River is deep, fast, and tree-lined; effective steelhead fishing there frequently requires heavy sinktips and meaty weighted flies; thus began the Skagit Revolution. Like Scandi heads, they attach to the running line with a loop-to-loop connection, but they're considerably shorter (20-25ft / 6-7.5m, plus or minus) and heavier, and they require a "tip" section (sometimes floating, often sinking) between the business end of the head and the leader to which your (usually weighted) fly will be attached. Elegant? Not so much. Effective? Oh yes, most definitely.

Although the style sacrifices delicacy, Skagit techniques are generally thought to be the easiest for newcomers to learn quickly, and they're fairly versatile. When paired with a floating tip, it's possible to fish small, light flies; throw on a heavy head and high-density sink tip and a short leader, and they'll handle very large and heavy flies.

They say there's nothing new under the sun, and that's usually true. But if there's been anything mostly new invented in the fly fishing world in recent years, it's been Skagit-style fishing, and it's very recent. The whole Skagit scene has developed in just the past three decades or so,

and many of the original innovators are still churning out fresh ideas: after all of that introduction, let's finally talk about *Micro Skagit*. As you might have already guessed, this style takes the fundamentals of Skagit lines and techniques developed for salmon and steelhead using rods in the 6-10wt range and scales them down for rod weights more frequently associated with trout fishing in rivers and small creeks – say, in the 2-5wt range. Rod weights don't quite always map from single-hand to double-hand rods, but they're close enough for our purposes here – and one of the coolest things about this niche is that these lines work beautifully with single-hand rods as well. In fact, some of the lighter 2H rods can be worked effectively with one hand, which increases your options while decreasing fatigue. Even the FFI is getting in on the fun – last year they released a whole [Skills Ladder for Single-hand Spey](#) casting.

### Pure Skagit

Now let's turn to Pure Skagit and OPST. Ed Ward and Jerry French were among the very first folks to realize that Skagit heads could be lightened and shortened (to under 20ft) for use with both single-hand rods and light double-handers. Ward conceived the holistic vision of "Pure Skagit" and started Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics (OPST) in the early 2010s to manufacture and sell the OPST Commando Head, the first Micro Skagit gear to hit the mainstream commercial market.

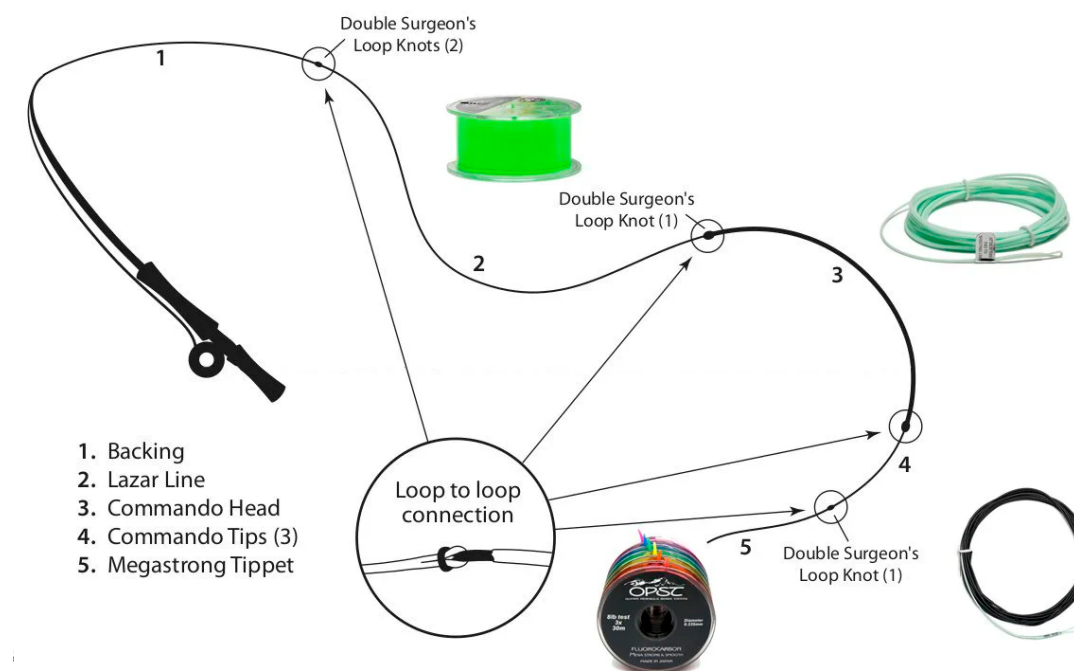
In turn, the Commando Heads spawned a still-evolving sub-specialty class of two-handed fly rods alternatively known as "Trout Spey", "Micro Spey", or "Micro Skagit" rods. A number of mainstream rod manufacturers now offer these rods, as do some custom rodmakers (turn the page to read about Redband Rods) and boutique rod companies (see my interview with Kerry Burkheimer later in this issue).

Although the other line manufacturers have now also come out with "short Skagit" lines, OPST continues to thrive at the vanguard of the revolution. The original Commando Heads (which are usually connected directly to monofilament running line) have been augmented by the Commando Smooth, which integrates a Commando Head directly into a coated running line. They also came up with the Commando Groove, a dual-density line that combines a floating section with an intermediate sinking line to get down in fast water while retaining control of the swing.

OPST has also just recently released an exciting second generation of their "MS" rods (we haven't thrown one yet),

and even their accessories rock. For at least the past five years, most of my camera gear has stayed safe and dry in a roll-top OPST Rainforest Waist Pack, still one of the best values for waterproof kit.

You may have noticed that these are deep waters; Skagit systems get very technical, very quickly. It takes time, effort, and experience to build an understanding of the relationships and trade-offs between rod lengths and weights, Skagit heads of different lengths and weights (measured in grains), tips of various lengths and densities, leader designs, and fly sizes and weights. Matching all of those variables to the conditions being fished can be intimidating, not to mention mastering the subtle arts of Spey and Skagit casting techniques. This stuff ain't for everybody. But like most complicated endeavors with a steep learning curve, the investments pay off down the line.



For me, after years of drifting away from the trout fishing world (thanks mostly to a pernicious saltwater addiction), Micro Skagit completely revitalized the trout game for me. I always loved swinging streamers and soft hackles, but OPST has unlocked a whole new universe.

This might be the best part: because OPST understands that tables full of grain weights can be scary, they've worked very hard to provide a comprehensive range of educational resources. Their website hosts a Learning Center, and a quick search on YouTube will turn up dozens of useful videos from Ed Ward, James Millard, Red's Fly Shop (one of the first shops to promote OPST), and many more. There's a whole new world here to explore! 🏹



A full OPST starter kit including a Commando Head, Lazar running line, and multiple tips can be purchased for under US\$200.

Learn more at [www.pureskagit.com](http://www.pureskagit.com)