

OLD MARINER REELS BY PAUL CONOVER

REVIEW BY BRIAN CLARK

My favorite privilege of writing about the fly fishing industry is the occasional opportunity to meet some of the talented characters who've invented, innovated, and refined

our retinue of gear and techniques. Over the past year or so I've gotten to know the fly reel innovator Paul Conover a little bit, and my life is richer for his acquaintance.

Thanks to the fact that his grandfather owned the gas pumps on Pier 5 in Miami, arguably the most famous boat dock in fishing history, as well as a garage a few blocks away, Paul grew up in the epicenter of saltwater angling. The machine shop at the back of that garage was where parts for the original Fin-Nor "Wedding Cake" fly reels were built. Paul machined many of the parts for the drags on those reels himself – that was his first job as a machinist.

Paul fished everywhere in South Florida, and he was mentored by legends. He landed his first tarpon with Jimmy Albright (yes, the knot) during the early 1950s, and he caught it on a Pflueger Medalist reel. Coincidentally, his mentors also included Al Pflueger Jr, a renowned Miami-based taxidermist and angler, who incidentally did not invent the Medalist reel – those came much earlier, built by an Ohio company founded by Ernest Pflueger in the 1880s. Al Pflueger Jr was an earnest fly fishing educator and conservationist who's in the IGFA Hall of Fame.

After a few decades working as a multifaceted machinist in the airline, medical, military, and law enforcement industries, Paul returned to Fin-Nor in the 1980s and transitioned the operation from a manual shop to more automated CNC-based manufacturing methods, cutting production time and costs while improving consistency and tolerances. By this point he was designing innovative new fly reel mechanisms and entirely novel reels of his own, including the Ahab and Fin-Nor FR. It's worth looking up some photos of those old models – you might notice that a number of popular saltwater fly reels which came later bear at least a passing resemblance, especially on the inside.

Fin-Nor was sold in 1995, and Paul left in 1996; he immediately started the Old Florida Fly Reel Company in Pembroke Pines. Old Florida was known for making reliable, reasonably priced fly reels that were lighter than many of their competitors but didn't sacrifice performance or durability. You might know Old Florida better today as Nautilus Reels – Paul made the first Nautilus reel, and the name change happened after the Mustad family bought the company in

2003. The reels they make today don't look or feel much like Paul's original designs, although they do still make sealed drag reels, another innovation that Paul pioneered.

After a number of years teaching machining at the University of Miami and making custom motorcycle parts, Paul got back into the fly reel game recently with Old Mariner Fly Reels after a decade spent refining new designs. His objective is to make unapologetically overbuilt saltwater reels that correct some latent issues plaguing other reels, a few of which have annoyed Paul for decades.

For example, most reels on the market today feature a quick-release mechanism that allows the spool to be removed for service or to be swapped out with a spare spool. That's useful, but if you think about the design, there's a problem: the entire spool is supported from just one side using a hub of some sort; wobble is inevitable. That doesn't matter much on a reel intended to catch trout which seldom gets spun fast or for an extended period of time, but when you're battling powerful saltwater species like adult tarpon or pelagics like billfish and tuna . . . it matters.

Old Mariner reels solve that problem by sandwiching a perfectly balanced spool inside the reel frame. Combined with extraordinary tolerances and leveraging – literally – a hermetically sealed cork-based draw-bar drag system which uses a proprietary lubricant from the aerospace industry, the result is an insanely smooth reel with an incredibly powerful drag. I don't say that lightly; my father worked for a fly reel company for several decades during my most formative fishing years, and I've been fortunate to have spun many, many different fly reels, including prototypes and premium models, both during the design process and on the water. Old Mariners are hands-down the smoothest fly reels I've ever handled, and that's going both directions – during free spin and with startup inertia under drag.

There are two obvious trade-offs with a captive spool in a full-frame reel: no spare spools, and a fixed retrieve direction which can be flipped only at the factory. I can live with both of those; the latter isn't uncommon among premium saltwater fly reels anyway, and it's standard on baitcasters. The performance and durability benefits are substantial; as the kids today might say, Paul's reels are "totally OP" ("overpowered"), and they look both unique and classic. They'd be almost elegant if they weren't so

obviously built to take damage and overpower huge fish.

As mentioned above, Paul's reels are unabashedly salty. Although he's teased us with a future freshwater design, his current offerings are intended for serious



saltwater anglers chasing big fish on rods from 6-15wt. He's currently making two different lines of reels, the Inshore and Offshore series. The Inshore reels come in two sizes, roughly 7-9wt and 9-11wt (as always with reels, it's fine to fudge the sizes somewhat in either direction once you know what you're doing), and they're somewhat lighter. The reel seats are ported, and Paul says that they use bearings with a slightly lower compression threshold than the Offshore reels; my firm impression is that they'd be bulletproof even for the most extreme fishing situations imaginable, and that I'm unlikely to ever do enough fishing in this or my next three lifetimes to wear one out.

Of course, that absolutely should not stop you from considering the still more robust Offshore series, and they offer at least one killer feature that I find compelling: the lever drag. Paul offers two styles of drag knob with two respective flavors of drag mechanism: Standard and Lever. The reels with rounded (or knurled) drag knobs use his Standard Drag, an incremental system that ramps up pressure on the fish very gradually; it's intended for anglers fishing light class tippets, often for IGFA records, where precise drag adjustments are critical.

For the rest of us who prefer heavier tippets and shorter fights, the Lever Drag system trades precision for time: sweeping the lever clockwise (forward from its starting position pointed at the rod handle) about one-quarter turn takes me from almost-free spool (no drag) to the "no backlash zone" for stripping out line. Between a quarter and a half-turn gets into my typical fishing drag range; a full rotation will have the drag cranked down tighter than you're ever likely to need in a real fishing situation.

I won't even pretend to be unbiased about this one: the lever drag is **AWESOME**. It perfectly suits my preferred style of fishing fish: heavy-tippet straight-rod down-low pull-hard. When I'm fishing 20# tippet for cooperative redfish, drag settings need to be close 'nuff rather than fine-tuned. It's particularly great for me because I too often forget to set my drag after stripping out line – that's no problem with the lever, just a quick bump down to 5 o'clock and I'm exactly where I need to be . . . and as a bonus, it never fails to put that old Jimmy Buffett tune back into my head. I've tried other lever drags, but they never worked for me. This one works so well and is so predictable, reliable, and powerful that I'm getting a sympathetic surge of adrenaline just typing this sentence.

As for colors, your choices are black or silver, and Paul's reels mix the two in ways I find particularly eye-catching. Despite the proliferation of colors now available on many reels, black and silver still provide the most durable and

color-fast anodized coatings. He sticks with what works.

Let's talk about clickers. Paul doesn't like them. He feels that they're unnecessary, and they're a common point of failure in all reels. He'll add a clicker to your reel if you ask nicely, but expect to get some side-eye. I was ambivalent about clickers prior to meeting Paul; some of my reels had them, some didn't – some used to have them, and I never bothered to fix them when they broke. But after having briefly attended the Conover School of Fly Reel Design, I've sworn off clickers for good.

One last feature: Paul ships his reels with hands-down the coolest neoprene reel covers on the market. It's a bit hard to explain, but they use a three-point hook-and-loop closure system that works around the reel handle and wraps cleanly over the rod handle and reel when attached. Why didn't I think of this myself??

Finally, what about service and warranty? Old Mariner offers the most generous coverage I've seen in the modern fly fishing industry. If ever a problem does arise – which appears highly unlikely to me – then you call Paul directly (+1 954 654 3911) and, within reason, he'll figure out how to get it fixed, even if you aren't the reel's original owner.

I've thoroughly enjoyed attempting – and failing – to break a few of Paul's reels over the last year. I fish regularly with my 17-year old son, so he's handled the reels almost as much as I have, and I've shared a fair bit with him from my exchanges with Paul. After working with the lever drag and hearing me relate Paul's opinions about clickers, my son's exact words were, "Wow. That dude

sounds thoroughly based."

Sometimes it's a little hard to tell what the kids these days mean when they use words that I thought I knew, so I had to ask for an explanation. We talked through what that phrase means to today's youngsters, and the gist appears to be a mix of "based on facts" and "based in reality" and "grounded" and "somebody who's been there, done that" along with "having an authentic opinion and not giving a shit about what most people think." All of that sure seems to fit perfectly for Paul, and I'm not sure we can offer a higher compliment.

- **Inshore:** the 610 retails for US\$640, and the 912 goes for US\$710
- **Offshore:** the 8WT Standard Drag starts at US\$760, and add \$120 for the Lever Drag. He also offers a 10WT, 12WT, and 12WT+ with various options, including a clicker – if you must

Check the website for exact specifications and pricing, or simply give Paul a call during normal business hours:

- **Phone:** +1 954 654 3911
- **Website:** www.oldmarinerreels.com



*Above: Old Mariner Offshore 8WT Lever Drag
Opposite, L-R: Offshore 8L, Offshore 12L, Inshore 912*