

THE Rod Builder

Text and Photography by Matt Straw

The sound of a Stradivarius violin defies explanation or reproduction by modern technicians. Notes of such purity leave the realm of technology wanting, even today, probably because Antonio Stradivari heard more than notes on a scale.

It's hard to compare a fishing rod with a Stradivarius, but the same principle is at play. A manmade thing of real beauty transcends the technology that built it—transcends all devices used to measure or define its worth. Wherever precision is required, the perfect tool becomes an extension of ourselves, joining physical and spiritual realms in ways that defy pricing.

We become attached to such tools. We give them names and places of honor. In the Brainerd Lakes area, angling craftsmanship worthy of open display can be found in a LakeLady Custom Fishing Rod—the closest thing to a Stradivarius to be found in our little corner of the angling world.

They are the handiwork of Kris Kristufek, a name and talent that conjure up Santa's workshop, but he wandered in from the opposite direction—from Kansas, in fact, where he was born and raised. He started working for the Kansas Oil Company in 1968. When he completed a training course for Amoco they asked where he would like to be stationed.

"As far north as possible," Kristufek told them, so he became a sales manager in the Twin Cities. "I moved my family up to Brainerd and we loved it. We bought a cabin at an old resort and decided this is where we want to live from now on.

"I was able to get out of the corporate world a little early and comfortably, but had

nothing to do," says Kristufek. "I had no outside hobbies other than fishing, so I started building rods for kicks. I just gave them away to friends and family, but one day a stranger on the ramp at Pelican asked, 'Where did you get that rod?' He made an order that day and I've been building rods professionally ever since."

Kristufek has been operating LakeLady out of his home on Pelican Lake in Breezy Point for twelve years. "I'm an outdoorsy dude from the flat plains of Kansas, where you can see the end of the world under the second overpass," he says. "That's just not me. Everything here in God's country is breathtaking. I'm excited every day to be here. If I had a choice to go anywhere, this would be it. I came for the variety of wildlife and waters—the shapes, colors, and textures of nature here. I love the deciduous forests."

When Kristufek says he'd rather be in Lake Country than anywhere else on earth, he has more points of comparison than most. He's been everywhere, delivering bone marrow and stem cells to patients in need the world over. "My son works for the NMDP (National Marrow Donor Program)," he says. "I told him I'd volunteer to deliver. Some immune-deficiency diseases can only be cured through immediate bone marrow or stem-cell transplants, and I've

made forty-six international trips in the last five years making those deliveries."

The international registry for such marrow and stem cells has grown exponentially in the past few years, Kristufek said. Material has to be an exact blood-type match, surgically extracted, medically approved, and delivered within twenty-four hours of extraction. "I go to a hospital that could be anywhere to pick up a gel-ice cooler that can't be x-rayed, so I have to carry it around the TSA machines," he says. "You want to get there on time? Take my flights. Arrangements are made to make certain we have no delays. I just carry it from point A to point B. A lab team is waiting for me at my destination and I become just another tourist."

Weather and mechanical issues can still get in the way, and travel delays can be life threatening for people Kristufek is delivering for. "It can be harrowing at times," he says. "Marrow won't last forever in that cooler—usually no longer than twenty-four hours. I have to be in the town where the donation is made the day before, and the donation is



Kris Kristufek spends about seven to ten hours on each custom LakeLady rod. Rodsounry workshop.

timed around the flight I have scheduled for departure. Takeoffs have priority. We're going to leave on time and arrive early in most cases, but coming back from Spain last year, at the airport in Madrid, the captain came on with one of those 'good news—bad news' reports. We were going to get to Amsterdam, but French air-traffic controllers put a halt to all flights over their air space. We had a ninety-minute delay. They had to radio ahead to hold my connecting flights. Adrenalin was pumping big time, but we made it."

When he's not blasting off for Buenos Aires, India, or China, Kristufek is carefully varnishing rare and colorful feathers to rod blanks or watching the seasons unfold around him. "Feather inlays, jewels, photos—I like off-the-charts stuff," he says. "I'm open to anybody's ideas. You tell me which company's blank you want me to start with and I'll listen to any and all ideas on how you want the rod to look."

Kristufek also restores, rebuilds, and creates bamboo rods from scratch. "I do a fair amount of bamboo restoration and building," he says. "Not that many around here, but every so often somebody brings in Grandad's old rods. Refurbishing old keepsakes is fulfilling. I'm working on a couple right now. I also build brand-new ones from scratch. Most are fly rods, but some ice rods, too. I build four or five bamboo rods per year, and about 140 graphite rods. Mostly

people want walleye, bass, musky, and pan-fish rods around here."

Depending on the complexity, Kristufek spends seven to ten hours building rods on the average. "But aesthetic wraps can take six hours just to create the intricate pattern," he says. "It's very delicate. It's woven on with a special loom one thread at a time to create images of fish, a lure, or whatever the customer wants. Like a tattoo, each one is different. There's a relationship between the size of your hand, ergonomics, and balance. I try to incorporate all of that to make the rod feel weightless with less strain and stress on your arms and connective tissues."

It's all about the real world, he says. "Fishing enters me into the real world. Nature is an experience. Life cycles are intriguing, and up here, it's constantly changing. I don't care about catching limits. I like to eat fish, but I'm not out to stock a freezer. I'm out there just to be out there. You become absorbed with nature. Be it the sunset or the insect hatch, it's amazing what you see if you pay attention."

The notes Stradivari heard live on through his instruments. By the same token, a little of Kristufek vibrates through every LakeLady rod. So you might want to visit LakeLady before Santa shanghai's Kristufek back to the North Pole. 🐾

lakeladyrods.com or 218.562.4512



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