

# ROCKWELL HAMMOND

by John Alevras

**This is more than a bio of an outstanding fly tier. It is a story of a respected professional, fisherman, fly tier and most importantly a friend.**

When most people hear “Rocky, Rocky, Rocky” a vision of Rocky Balboa, that battered, pugilist from the streets of Philadelphia comes to their mind. But on the Kispiox River in British Columbia, at Washington Steelhead Flyfishers and Northwest Atlantic Salmon Fly Guild meetings or at fishing expositions everyone knows it is Rockwell (Rocky) Hammond being acknowledged. Why, because Rocky Hammond has not been a dabbler, but an enthusiastic, respected man of action and results.

When Steve Brocco, Harry Lemire and Garry Anderson, respected in their own right among fly tiers, were asked to use the three or four words that best describe Rocky it became clear why he is so admired, has a very successful dental practice, is an effective leader and why he has accomplished so much. “High-energy, focused, passionate, intense and committed” were the words used to define him. To understand the essence of Rocky is more than just tying a lovely fly admired by friends, it is winning competitions, it is more than using fine antique hooks, it is making them and it is not just involvement in a salmon fly guild, it is leading it to importance.



Let us take a step back. Not unlike most fly fishermen and fly tiers Rocky’s roots in fishing began as a youngster flinging Daredevils and Mepps spinners in his local waters surrounding Seattle. His transition to fly fishing occurred his freshman year at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon thanks to his roommate, Brad Boyden who only fished the fly and tied them as well. It was 1970 that Brad provided Rocky the basic instruction in casting and fly tying that began a steady assimilation into the arcane world of fly fishing. The transition would have been rapid, but for a lack of money, varsity soccer, academics, and women, of course. But, even with these constraints, interest smoldered and skills improved, enough so, that by his junior year he and Brad were off to the Rogue River in pursuit of the river’s half-pound steelhead.

It was not until he entered dental school at the University of Oregon in Portland in 1975 that Rocky got serious about fly tying. This was primarily the influence of Dave McNeese and thanks to the close proximity of his fly shop. On Saturdays, Rocky and soccer teammate, Todd Yorke would go to the shop and watch Dave perform his magic with fur and feathers. These hours spent with Dave were far more than instructional. They set a standard of what excellence looked like, and most importantly, Rocky walked away infected with enthusiasm to achieve Dave’s high level of skill. The barb was buried deep.

There was only one problem. A struggling grad student had little money for fishing and fly tying equipment and materials. It was not until the summer of 1979 that Rocky was able to make his first serious fishing excursion. With a Fenwick rod,

knock-off Pfluger Medalist reel and a box of red Humpies and Elk Hair Caddis he and Brad Boyden headed to Montana for the first of many annual "sanity maintenance" trips where he caught a few fish, saw great country and returned home, "convinced more than ever this fly fishing was for me."

It was not until graduation from dental school in 1979 and a move to Fall City, Washington that opportunities began to occur. Progress in fly tying had been slow so he signed-up for his first formal class with Bob Sims. Bob had taught over three hundred students, unfortunately Rocky was his last because Lou Gehrig's disease had taken a firm grip and ultimately took his life. Bob recognized an enthusiastic student and taught Rocky to tie a diversity of trout patterns that significantly enhanced his skills. Now more eager than ever to advance his skills he attended clinics at Seattle's Eddie Bauer store, then joined the Northwest Fly Anglers Club where he participated in more classes and met Steve Brocco who became a mentor and life-long friend. By this time Rocky had launched a career, had a little spare change and was ascending the river of fly fishing about as rapidly and focused as a steelhead's ascent of the Skeena River.

In 1981 Rocky caught his first steelhead and realized these magnificent fish needed to be a mainstay of his fishing. It was time to build on the foundation gained in tying trout flies, and the techniques and creative beauty Dave McNeese had shown him. His angling horizons expanded again in 1990 when with his wife Jill and son Madison he made his way to the Baja for his first saltwater fishing experience. This opened up another exciting dimension of fly fishing and Rocky again immersed himself into with what was his now familiar intensity and enthusiasm. In 1995 college roommate Brad got Rocky to go to Ascension Bay for bonefish, exposing him to flats-fishing. Along with these new fish and destinations came another opportunity to broaden what had become formidable fly tying skills. Salt water fishing exposed him to new, innovative techniques and materials that added to his repertoire and helped stimulate his creative juices. Rocky was no longer duplicating Crazy Charlies and Lefty Deceivers. Instead he was crafting new productive patterns like his Dr. Rockbottom that accounted for five IGFA world record trevally.

Although salt water fishing opened exciting new horizons and still does, the fascination with steelhead fishing and flies continued to be the primary core of interest that lead Rocky to join the Northwest Atlantic Salmon Fly Guild in 1985. When fishing friend Byron Bjerke convinced Rocky to start fishing the Kispiox and Skeena Rivers in 1990, a new perspective developed concerning the flies he was using. The wild steelhead of these British Columbia rivers aroused a desire to create and tie flies to match the magnificence of these fish. Egg Sucking Leeches, although effective, lacked the beauty and artistry he wished to incorporate in his flies. This brought Rocky back to the Guild where Harry Lemire, Greg Hunt, Dave McNeese and Steve Brocco's steelhead creations provided more inspiration to elevate his skills and the elegance of his flies.

Involvement in the Guild also exposed Rocky to the literature of Kelson, Hale, Pryce-Tannatt and Traherne, the intricate beauty of Pophams, Barons, Dee Strip Wing and Spey patterns and an admiration of artistic, beautiful flies. But, unlike most salmon fly tiers that replicate the famous Victorian patterns for display in globes and frames, Rocky wanted to build upon the allure of historic famous flies and create personalized and distinctive patterns to be fished in the currents of steelhead rivers. This he has accomplished. Creative, graceful, often dynamic flies now fill his boxes; flies that have met the approval of steelhead, the admiration of fishermen and provided personal gratification.

Like many seeking a high level of excellence, still more was needed to satisfy Rocky`s call for achievement. Fellow Guild member and respected friend Jim Ferguson had seen his exquisite flies and encouraged him to participate in fly tying competitions. That was 2006 and by the end of 2011 he had participated in the Irish Open, Fly Tying Forum Contests, FAOL Atlantic Salmon & Steelhead Fly Tying Competitions, the World Tuscany Open, C&A Fly Tying Contests, FQSA Salmon Fly Tying World Championships, the Helsinki Spey Clave Classic Salmon Fly Challenge and the US Open Atlantic Salmon & Steelhead Fly Tying Contests. In a short five years Rocky had won nineteen first place, fifteen second place and three third place awards in a wide variety of categories like freestyle salmon, creative salmon fly, salmon hairwing, classic salmon fly, classic wet fly, feather-wing, spey original design, creative hairwing, a variety of trout fly categories and best over-all. Clearly the inspiration of Dave McNeese`s beautiful color tones, the vibrant designs of Traherne, the encouragement of Guild members and Rocky`s personal commitment to excel have resulted in an extraordinary record.

The honor of having respected fly tiers from around the world select his flies for awards in competition has brought fulfillment, but probably not as much as the satisfaction resulting from his leadership of the Northwest Atlantic Salmon Fly Guild. Presidency of the group represented an opportunity to demonstrate that his talents go beyond the fly tying vice. Since 2005 when he assumed the Guild`s leadership, a good organization has become great with fifty members. His "passionate, visionary commitment" has resulted in the Guild becoming the largest organization of its kind in the world. His relentless, positive approach has been contagious leading other members to step-up to establish world-wide connections, which in turn has made available sources for exotic materials, guest speakers and tiers like Mike Radencich, Marv Nolte, Rich Younger, Dave Barlow, Anton and Edwin Rist, Bud Guidry and John McLain and ultimately brought recognition to the outstanding talents within the group. Members of the group are not hesitant to acknowledge what a positive force Rocky has been in transforming the club.

Rocky is proud of the Guild`s growth and stature. The basic goals of sharing, education and socialization have not changed, there simply is a lot more of all of it occurring. In typical Rocky fashion, he credits the support of Glenn Wilson, Steve Brocco, Harry Lemire and others in the group for the club`s success.

No one commits themselves to excellence without the inspiration and influence of those that symbolize the best. Rocky is now a symbol of distinction encouraging and inspiring others. As Garry Anderson, Steve Brocco and Harry Lemire said of Rockwell Hammond, "He is high-energy, focused, intense, committed and passionate." We are all fortunate that he is.