



The Man Who Changed Fly Fishing *Forever*

How a refugee from Hungary found his way to Florida and invented a reel that would tame the biggest, baddest fish in the sea

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MAN OF METTLE
Fine-tuning a Signature Series fly reel.
Opposite: Ted Juracsik at his workbench in Chokoloskee, Florida.



A
DRAPERY
OF MANGROVE
JUTS FROM
THE SHORE.

Tibor “Ted” Juracsik knows it will push the redfish into a narrow channel in the mud, away from the overhang of twisted roots and into the tide. Behind me, Juracsik leans on the push pole, and the flats boat gently rotates clockwise, placing me at a perfect ninety-degree angle to the fish. I wiggle the fly rod tip to free a bit of line. “Another moment, another moment,” Juracsik murmurs, his Hungarian accent hanging in the air of the Everglades’ Ten Thousand Islands. We wait, together.

All of Juracsik’s life, it has been this way—as a teenage tool-and-die maker in a Budapest bicycle factory, as a young refugee in New York City, as a metalworker and the designer of perhaps the best-known fly fishing reel in the world, the Billy Pate Reel. Standing on the poling platform, the seventy-five-year-old Juracsik runs it all through his head—the angles, the loads, the efficiencies—and when the pause on the deck of the flats boat becomes nearly unbearable, he says, softly: “Now.”

I make two false casts and the distance is spot-on, the black Clouser minnow dimpling the water not three inches from the exposed mud. Unfortunately, my windage isn’t so precise. The cast is eighteen inches too far to the left, and as the leader grazes the fish’s back, the redfish explodes in a blowup of brackish water and mud.

My shoulders slump. It is not the first fish I’ve sent fleeing for cover this morning. “It’s okay,” Juracsik consoles, and I feel the flats boat shift as he plants the pole, already hunting for another target. “I have done the same thing.”

Maybe, I think. But not in a very long time. After all, Ted Juracsik is a name engraved—literally—in the history and development of big-game saltwater fly fishing. With the 1976 design of Juracsik’s Billy Pate Reel, a stout, machined anti-reverse reel with a brawny drag inspired by the clutch plate of an old Ford, anglers found a tool that could tame the strongest game fish in the ocean. Ever since, the reel has been the undoer of untold numbers of tarpon and marlin and roosterfish and reds, as it established Juracsik as one of the pioneers of a new era of big-game fishing along with luminaries such as Pate and Lefty Kreh and Flip Pallot. In 1995, Juracsik introduced a new line of reels under his boyhood name—Tibor—and these elegant, hand-finished tools are considered by many to be the pinnacle of fly reel design.

“OUTSIDE.” THAT IS WHAT THE LOCALS CALL THIS PLACE, the stone crabbers and pompano netters and fishing guides of the Chokoloskee area. “Outside” is the westernmost edge of the Ever-

ON THE WATER

Below: A flock of white ibises takes flight in the Everglades. Opposite: Juracsik on the hunt for redfish in the backcountry.



glades, where the Gulf of Mexico meets dry land in a lacework of mangrove islands and hummocks and keys that spread over fifty wilderness miles of Florida’s southwestern coast. Mind-boggling numbers of redfish and snook prowl the rising and falling tides here along the outside edge of the Ten Thousand Islands.

We’re having a hard time making the pieces fit, however. West winds have churned the water to chocolate milk. The darkest flies disappear two inches below the surface, and we spook fish after fish. It is frustrating work, but I find solace every time I lift my eyes from the water forty feet in front of the boat to the vast expanse of bay and verdant shore all around. Jungles of mangrove are scored by creeks and passes of open water. Yellow-crowned night herons, tri-colored herons, egrets, and shorebirds wing constantly overhead. Across one broad bay a small pod of bottlenose dolphins crashes bait in two feet of water, throwing up ten-foot geysers of spray. Here, in a place as unlike any that he could have imagined as a boy, Juracsik tells me of the odyssey that brought him to Southern shores.

Born in 1937 on an island in the Danube River outside Budapest, Juracsik grew up playing Ping-Pong and soccer, working in his father’s grocery and dairy stores, and fishing for carp in the bomb craters blasted in the Danube during World War II. “No reel or nothing,” he says, laughing. “Balls of dough and red paprika and pull the line with your hand.” At the age of seventeen he became the youngest Hungarian to be awarded Masterpapers in the tool-and-die trade and went to work in a local bicycle factory. By then, Communism was sweeping over Eastern Europe. His family’s businesses were nationalized. Soon tens of thousands of Budapest dissidents were arrested and shuttled off to slave labor camps. When a revolt erupted in 1956, Juracsik was swept into the front lines of the Hungarian Revolution.

The rebellion was led by college students and young people, and early in October, Juracsik joined a youthful crowd that massed outside a Budapest police station. “I got a Mauser bolt-action rifle,” he recalls, “and we headed into the city where we could shoot the Russians from the windows of apartment buildings.” Within a few days, the Soviet-backed government fell, but euphoria and freedom were short-lived. Two weeks after the start of the revolt, a massive Soviet offense moved into Budapest, crushing the dissent. More than twenty-five hundred resistance fighters were killed, and thousands more arrested and shuttled away. Juracsik and his friends “got



scared and left the guns and walked home.”

For a week Juracsik lived in terror. Then, in the middle of the night, in the middle of November, the banging on his parents’ door could mean only one thing. It was a neighbor, Juracsik’s best friend’s father, and he was frantic. “Tibor,” he was yelling. “They have taken Charles, and they are asking for you!”

Juracsik grabbed an overcoat. His father took off his gold watch and handed it to his son. In minutes, Juracsik was on the run. The secret police were coming; he never had the chance to tell his mother goodbye.

For a week Juracsik and a small group of other freedom fighters made the furtive walk to the Austrian border, sleeping in barns, hitching rides on milk trucks. After a frantic nighttime dash across the three-hundred-yard-wide border, laced with land mines, Juracsik stayed at a succession of refugee camps, where he traded his father’s watch for two large salamis that he subsequently bartered for clothing. From there he boarded a refugee plane headed to the United States. “You could choose where to go,” he says. “Canada, Switzerland, Italy. I chose the United States because it was the farthest away, and there was a saying I’d heard since I was a child: ‘In America, the sidewalks are paved with gold.’”

The rest of Juracsik’s story is straight out of Horatio Alger. Spon-

Island Sound. “Oh, we had a life, a good life,” he remembers. During the late 1960s the family began visiting Florida, trips that grew in number and duration after his in-laws bought a house in South Florida in the early 1970s. And that’s when another piece of Juracsik’s unlikely journey fell into place.

Among saltwater fly fishing’s elite, the story of Juracsik’s and famed angler Billy Pate’s meeting is a part of the sport’s canon. One day in 1974, Juracsik stood at the reel counter of World Wide Sportsman, the Islamorada institution founded by Pate, the guide George Hommell, and a wealthy Coca-Cola distributor, Carl Navarre. A friend of Juracsik’s from Fort Lauderdale worked at the tackle shop, and as they were chatting about the aluminum spools Juracsik was turning in his shop to replace the plastic spools in his casting reels, Pate strode up to the counter, disgusted with a fly reel that had locked up in the heat of a tarpon fight. Juracsik’s

MADE IN THE U.S.A.
Juracsik poles his skiff at sundown in the Everglades; watching the progress on a reel in the early stages of construction.

friend shrugged his shoulders at the tale, pointed at the customer standing quietly at the counter, and told Pate: “Ted can make you a reel that will never break.”

Juracsik, who had never even held a fly reel, found himself in the gaze of perhaps the most famous saltwater fly fisherman who ever lived.

“So you make fly reels?” Pate asked.

“No,” Juracsik replied, then added with a tone of hard-won confidence: “But I can make anything.”

As Juracsik opened up Pate’s classic Fin-Nor reel to inspect the workings, he felt right at home. “It was nothing but a machine in there,” he recalls. “You know—this does this, and that does that. It was no mystery. Right away I see the problem.” The reels of the day simply hadn’t been designed to blunt the sizzling runs of one-hundred-pound game fish: The drag had too little surface area to stop a tarpon on the jump.

On the spot, Pate asked Juracsik if he would make him a reel. Juracsik agreed, with one significant caveat: He’d have to bring it back on vacation the next year.

The two reels Juracsik delivered to Pate set saltwater fly fishing on a new course. They were collaboratively designed: Pate

wanted left-handed, anti-reverse reels. Juracsik machined them by hand, with stainless steel reel feet, oversize cork drags built like the clutch plates in a car transmission, and arbors large enough for 12-weight lines. From bonefish to billfish, the reels were capable of stopping the fastest, biggest game fish in saltwater. When Pate asked him how much he owed him, Juracsik struck an all-American deal. Not a penny, he said. Just teach me how to use them.

Over the course of the next year, Juracsik made two hundred reels for Pate’s World Wide Sportsman. Wilma engraved the reels in their garage workshop with the cursive legend that would become a legend itself: “*Made by Ted Juracsik.*”

In 1974, Pate caught a 146-pound striped marlin off the coast of

Ecuador, reportedly the first marlin ever taken on a fly. And soon big-game saltwater fly fishing shows such as *The American Sportsman* fed a steady diet of exotic locations. Fly anglers battled big fish—tarpon, sailfish, and marlin—off the Florida coast and south into Central America. Famous guides such as Stu Apte poled celebrity anglers such as Ted Williams.

By 1976, Juracsik was making six hundred Billy Pate Reels a year, in addition to running his thriving tool-and-die business. He’d moved to Florida, bedazzled by the water, the warm weather, and the make-your-own-piece-of-paradise gestalt that defined the state. In the years since, Ted Juracsik Tool and Die has made components of everything from motor brackets to lunar landing craft. And Juracsik’s reels have brought some of the world’s largest fish to heel. Last year, twenty-eight new International Game Fish Association world records were landed with Tibor reels, bringing to nearly eight hundred the number of world records held by the Tibor Reel Corporation.

WE SPOT THE FISH AT PRECISELY THE same moment, with my rod in mid-cast and Juracsik’s push pole planted in the muck. We’re working green, rooty banks deep in the wind-sheltered backcountry of the Ten Thousand Islands, where open water and mangroves blanket the miles like a vernal doily. I stop the cast abruptly and the fly plops almost delicately just to the right of a copper-colored smear in the water. The fish turns and slashes and then it’s off and gone, streaking across an open pond.

“Let him run,” Juracsik says, beaming. “There’s plenty of space here, plenty of time to enjoy this fish.” A few minutes later the redfish cants to one side, tiring, and we lift the ten-pounder gently for a photograph. “What a fish that is!” Juracsik croons.

Now, after a lifetime of fishing and travel and “work, work, work, let me tell you, work,” Juracsik’s is a quiet life, rather elegant in its compact outlines. “I don’t drink too much, and I don’t smoke, and I don’t party,” he tells me later, after the tide turns and chases us back to his small Chokoloskee compound of boat sheds and outbuildings and workshops and a trim house on pilings, all overlooking the very edge of the vastness of the wild Ten Thousand Islands. “You know what I do? Look over there.” He nods toward an old concrete cistern, maybe ten feet square, packed like a quiver with aluminum rods and angle iron and metal

channels. “The commercial fishermen around here, they keep me busy making this and fixing that. What am I going to do, watch the television all day? No, no.”

No, indeed. His days start at 6:00 a.m. There is orange juice and coffee, toast and maybe an hour of *Imus in the Morning*. A five-mile morning run. “It keeps the joints from locking up,” he says and grins. Then he will work; even today, there is no shortage of work. On Wednesday nights he plays Ping-Pong with friends in Naples. He spends maybe half his time at his home in Boca Raton. He still fishes perhaps two hundred days of the year, about half of that offshore, on his thirty-one-foot *Marianne*. Most of the rest is in the Ten Thousand Islands.

And he never stops tinkering with reels. The Billy Pate Reel is still in production; surgeons in particular are enamored of the anti-reverse engineering that protects fingers from the smashing speeds of a reel handle harnessed to a five-hundred-pound fish. In 1995, Juracsik introduced the Everglades, the first in his Tibor line of reels that are unmistakably, unabashedly Juracsik. It now includes the tiny, jewel-like Spring Creek and the Pacific, a monstrous marlin tamer the size of a small coconut. With the exception of a few screws and springs, every frame, spool, drag knob, handle, counterweight, and main shaft is made in the Tibor plant in Delray Beach, Florida.

Of this, Juracsik is defiantly proud, but at the same time the challenges facing an American manufacturer of just about anything are daunting. For the last several years he’s experimented with ways to produce a freshwater trout reel with the expected level of Tibor craftsmanship—not to mention the lifetime warranty—yet with a retail price south of \$150. His twenty-foot-long workbench is littered with spools and frames, handles and reel seats. “But China can make things so cheap, I just can’t compete,” he says. “So far, it is a big disappointment.”

What never disappoints is his time on the water. Perhaps that’s because all he asks these days of his adopted homeland, the mangrove labyrinths of southwestern Florida, is simply time. After I release the redfish, I tell Juracsik to pick up a rod, make a few casts, and take a break from poling. He thinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “I’ve caught a lot of fish in my life, so I don’t have to win the game no more.” He plants the pole and we are on the hunt. “Just to be in the game. That is enough.” ☉



sored by a Catholic orphanage in Brooklyn—St. Vincent’s Home—Juracsik began building a new, American life.

He found work in a plastics factory, moved up to making dies, and held down three jobs at one time. In 1960 he married Wilma Hanak, another Hungarian immigrant, and moved into his in-laws’ home. Two years later he had enough work to quit his day job and hang his shingle as Ted Juracsik Tool and Die. By 1970 he had four employees and practically no debt. “I never moved out of the garage,” he says. “I never borrowed a bunch of money. I paid my own way.”

And he reveled in an unexpected outlet for his boyhood passion. Juracsik had seven brothers-in-law, all of them fishermen, and they chased striped bass and bluefish up and down the beaches of Long

Reels by Juracsik

THE BIG THREE



The BILLY PATE

The anti-reverse reel Juracsik built for Billy Pate is perhaps the most famous reel in the sport’s history. “It’s the most rugged reel I ever made. If I had to take one reel to the end of the earth, and make my living eating off the land and out of the water, that’s the reel I would take.”



The RIPTIDE

With its large arbor, the Riptide recovers line very quickly, perfect for big strong fish. “It’s not too big, not too small, not too heavy. The first large-arbor reel I made, and it’s a good one. It’s good for bonefish, mackerel, salmon, and you could land a pretty-good-sized tarpon with that reel. That’s the one-reel-for-everything reel.”



The SIGNATURE SERIES

Introduced in 2010, the Signature’s sealed drag endears it to saltwater anglers who rely on rugged systems. “People look at it and say, This thing has no parts in it! And that’s the beauty of it. You have many parts, many things can go wrong. I got the idea for it when I was changing the bearing seals on a boat trailer. So simple, but so right!”