

Masters at the Bench

Norm Domagala/By Glenn Zinkus



Chartreuse Tiger



Mr. Blue Callibaetis Emerger



Mini Zonker Jig Purple



Blue Midnight



Electric Shrimp



Cope's Damsel Nymph



Mini Lucent Jig



Mr. Blue Muddler



Mr. Sculpin



Deer Hair Callibaetis



Kan Do Midge Pupa



Hot Head Mayfly Nymph



Works Great Bugger



Muddler Candy



Flashy Boogie



Electric Blue Comet



Blue Collar Midge



Lime Green Mayfly Nymph



Orange Fusion



Northwest Clouser



JR Sculpin

Hart is poured into every fly spun at the vise of Norm Domagala. This congenial Oregonian creates innovative patterns that are fish-catching craftwork, derived from trials and observations on the water over many seasons. His inquisitive nature, coupled with a flair for finding original ways to use materials, provides Domagala, his friends, and his clients with an ever-expanding arsenal of deadly flies.

In the 1970s, Domagala serendipitously settled on a rented 50-acre farm in Lobster Valley, Oregon. At the time, Lobster Valley was an angler's utopia, and Domagala immersed himself in the opportunities. His angling world was anadromous-fish-centric during his early fishing days, when he frequented the Alsea River tributaries, including Lobster Creek, as well as Five Rivers, and the North and South Forks of the Alsea. He fished with spinners and jigs, frequenting Eugene-area fly shops to pick up the marabou he used to make his jigs. Allen Klein, who later opened Homewaters

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Fly Shop in Eugene, eventually told Domagala that he should go beyond tying jigs and start tying flies; after all, Klein suggested, the natural progression from spinning jigs is tying flies. Domagala took that advice and bit the ground running, tying flies for the prolific runs of chinook and coho salmon, and steelhead, in the Alsea system; his backyard streams were proving grounds where he could observe fish and strive to refine his fly patterns.

He soon began floating the coastal rivers and creeks in a neighborhood wooden McKenzie-style drift boat. He and his angling buddy floated the well-known rivers, such as the Alsea and Siletz, and also explored smaller, lesser-known streams with runs of prized wild steelhead. Again he branched out, and by the 1980s was towing that boat to the big-trout lakes of central Oregon: Hosmer Lake, Crane Prairie Reservoir, Wickiup Reservoir, and East Lake. The still-water action engendered creating, testing, and refining a litany of lake patterns.

Domagala further broadened his fishing horizons in the 1990s with sojourns in British Columbia. The Nitinat River on the west coast of Vancouver Island became an angling laboratory where he continued to adjust his salmon patterns. The British Columbia angling opportunities became addictive, and Domagala soon began fishing the lakes in the Kamloops region. He established his base camp at Dragon Lake, and to this day returns each season to Dragon and nearby lakes.

Having gravitated toward still-water fishing, Domagala fondly remembers meeting esteemed central Oregon still-water expert and fly tier Jim Cope. On one of the lakes in that region, Domagala was struggling to find a fly the fish would eat. Cope came to his rescue, paddling over in a float tube and offering Domagala a few deadly patterns, including a JC Emerger, a deer-hair/

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At events such as the Northwest Fly Tyer & Fly Fishing Expo, held in Albany, Oregon, Norm Domagala always attracts a crowd. Always congenial, he enjoys sharing his fly-tying techniques and ideas about pattern design (above). Domagala especially enjoys plying the beautiful trout-filled lakes of the Century Drive region in central Oregon. These fertile waters are ideal for testing his latest still-water patterns (below).

rabbit-hair concoction that is elegantly simple, and deadly on mountain lakes.

Some years later I enjoyed watching Domagala pay it forward with a similar act of generosity when he gave another angler a small selection of flies that seemed to be the only patterns taking large Crane Prairie rainbows that day. I've never forgotten how astonished this stranger was, no doubt because successful flies and techniques tend to be guarded secrets among lake-fishing cultists (and beyond).

After their chance meeting on a Cascade lake, Domagala attended one of Cope's tying classes and learned the finer points of still-water fly tying. This included Cope's style of dressing ultra-thin bodies on flies such as damselfly nymphs and patterns to mimic each stage in the relevant life cycle of the *Callibaetis* mayfly. Domagala, who uses paintbrush bristles dyed in shades of olive, tan, and dun as a primary material to tie Cope-style still-water nymphs, insists that "the Cope-style damselfly nymphs are the most effective that I tie to this day."

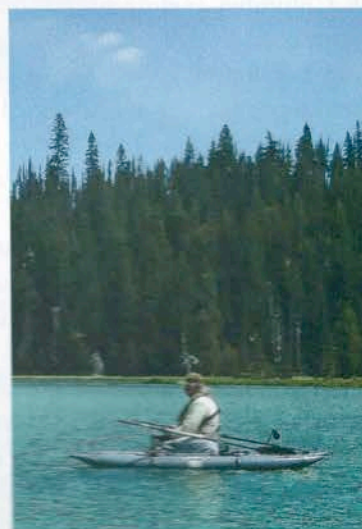
Oregon is richly blessed with fly-tying and angling talent, and in those early years of his fly tying, Domagala was also befriended—and influenced—by Bob Borden, founder of Hareline Dubbin. The two began fishing together and have logged many days, not only in British Columbia, but also at the mouth of Oregon's Rogue River in pursuit of fresh-from-the-sea chinook. Domagala also immersed himself in tying classes taught by such well-known experts as Buz Buszek Fly Tying Award winner Stan Walters, author Dave Hughes, and the late steelhead angling icon Alec Jackson. "I got to learn and refine my techniques with some really great teachers," Domagala says.

In the 1990s, Domagala became a fixture at the Northwest Fly Tyer & Fly Fishing Expo, which at that time was held in Eugene (it is now held in Albany). There he found an ideal venue for teaching fly tying and swapping ideas with other tiers. He soon branched out as a demonstration fly tier and fly-tying instructor at other shows, including the Fly Fishers International conclave held each summer.

Ever the cerebral tinkerer, Domagala continues to refine his patterns and create new flies based on observations in the field and input from other anglers near and far. Some of his still-water flies have vibrantly colored accents. He borrowed that idea from his salmon and steelhead flies, and finds them to be especially effective at times. His European fly customers have also influenced his tying, especially in regard to blending synthetic and natural materials and adding color to each fly.

Scandinavian tiers in particular, he points out, use more color in their flies. Perhaps more importantly, Domagala keenly observes life happening around him. Last year, at Dragon Lake, he watched an orange worm crawling up his shirt. Based on that, he whipped up an orange midge-style pattern with an orange bead, orange wire, and tan thread, and the new fly quickly became the rock star of the trip. He later found more of those worms around the lakeshore and in his boat, and deduced that they were falling out of bankside cottonwood trees.

Domagala has been a pattern designer for Montana Fly Company nearly since the company's founding, and is a member of the Whiting Pro Team. He also sells his flies to individuals and fly shops (email him at fshrnorm@peak.org). Decades after he completed his first fly, Domagala now ties more flies than ever, and keeps thinking up improvements every time he sits in front of the vise. He is motivated by his desire for constant improvement and inspired by the many people who taught him.



Glenn Zinkus is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Oregon.