



THE ORIGINS OF ULTRA-LIGHT SPINNING

Hans van der Pauw

Certain ways of angling are at least as rewarding for their technique and style as for the results they have to offer. It's not that we can do without the catch, but the modus operandi can be a delight in itself. This is perhaps most clearly recognisable in the fine art of fly fishing. But it's just as much the case with ultra-light fishing. This article is about ultra light spinning - the original form of the ultra-light techniques.

Ultra-light: what and why

What do I mean with 'ultra-light spinning' - or simply 'UL spinning'? To keep it simple, I'll define 'spinning' in this article as fishing for predatory fish with all sorts of artificial baits by retrieving them on a spinning rod - even though spinning can be done with natural baitfish as well. But what is 'ultra-light'? Well, it can be a relative notion which depends on what species you are fishing for. Fishing for perch with a 2 lb line and 1/8 oz spinner could certainly be considered ultra-light, but so could fishing for shark with a 1 oz spinning rod and 8lb line. For the purposes of this article, however, I won't start from the prey, but from the tackle used, or more precisely from the spinning rods. In doing so 'ultra-light' becomes an absolute notion, defined by the casting weight of the rods we use.

Different countries have different definitions of what an UL spinning rod is, and each definition is nothing more than an arbitrary choice - as definitions often are. In the Netherlands, where I'm from, we have a long-standing tradition with UL spinning. Here an UL spinning rod is considered to have a maximum casting weight of 6 grammes or less (6 grammes being slightly less than 1/4 oz). In the USA the



Silvain Massé, *Au léger - ultra-léger* (1946).

upper limit is generally considered to be 1/4 oz (7 grammes); any spinning rod with a lower casting weight is called ultra-light. There is very little difference between these two definitions of ultra-light. But the French have other, much lighter standards: only rods with casting weights up to 3 grammes are called *ultra-léger* (ultra-light)

over there. (There used to be a class called *extra-léger* for casting weights from 4 up to 6 grammes, but that term has largely been abandoned now. And although some French now call the 4-6 grammes range ultra-light as well, most of them consider it as light.)

I propose to stick to 1/4 oz as the upper limit for UL spinning and I'm sorry for this tiresome academic exercise, but at least now we know what we're talking about.

Now that UL spinning has been defined, the second question pops up. To what does UL spinning owe its right of existence? Or rather: what are the benefits of a technique that only seems to increase the risk of losing fish (and lures) because of the light lines that are necessitated by the low casting weights used? In fact UL spinning has two *raison d'être*. Firstly it serves a functional purpose and that's the reason it was developed: it makes it possible to cast very light spinners and spoons or tiny plugs with spinning gear, and to present these to a fish that in certain circumstances would shy away from heavier equipment and from a more conspicuous presentation. Fly fishermen know all about this and I know what their answer would be too ('grab a fly rod'). However, in some situations it's almost impossible to fly fish,





because of heavy bankside vegetation or other impediments. UL spinning can then offer possibilities, such as confined and concealed, 'sniper-like' casting of small but compact spinners and spoons. But there's more to it than mere functionality.

This brings me to the second, and to many the most important *raison d'être*. UL spinning is a technique that implies a great deal of refinement and subtle perfection. And this also goes for the tackle used for it: slender, nervous rods, small reels of watch-like precision and gossamer lines that gracefully stretch through the air. In fact the tackle weighs so little you hardly notice it, and when you have a fish on, the contact can be very intense - you feel it thumping and splashing directly in your hands. For those anglers that are susceptible to the joy of all these delicacies, this reason by itself has already so much to offer that functionality might as well come second place. They go for UL spinning even in circumstances where another technique might be more effective - just like fly fishermen after salmon prefer to ignore the deadly effectiveness of the despicable worm. Their choice is made purely for pleasure and enjoyment. And isn't that what fishing should be all about?

As we see, ultra-light spinning is largely a matter of personal taste and mentality. And because of this its popularity varies between countries. The Japanese are very keen on it and it also has a lot of proponents in Denmark and the Netherlands. The British, however, are as a whole more competitive and more focused on results (if I may say so as a bloody foreigner), which is why to most of them a game like specimen hunting is bound to have more appeal than ultra-light techniques - rather play it safe than to run the risk of losing a whopper. And the Germans in general use such heavy angling materials that they wouldn't even understand why ultra-light

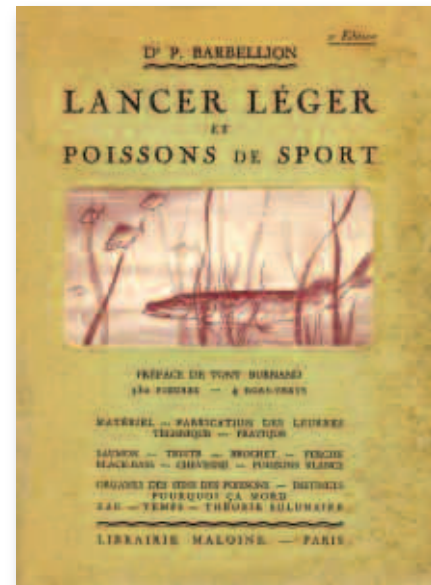
spinning should have a place in the universe at all. This is all broadly speaking of course.

The origins in France

Now that we know a little bit about the what and why of UL spinning, we can at last turn to its origins. On the Continent the leading role in the development of UL spinning techniques and tackle was taken by the French in the mid-1930s. The first French publications on casting very light lures were *Le Lancer des poids légers* ('Light Weight Casting') by Jean Venesmes, published in 1934, and Jean Huillet's *Les Leurres Légers - Leur employ dans la pêche au lancer* ('Light Lures - Their use in spinning') from 1935. Then, in 1941 Dr Pierre Barbellion published a book called *Lancer léger et poissons de sport* ('Light casting and sport fish'). In this he introduced the term lancer extra-léger (extra-light casting). In Barbellion's case this was done with casting weights up to 3 grammes (not from 4 up to 6 grammes, as extra-léger was defined later).

For this technique - which was actually UL spinning before it was called that - Barbellion employed very slender split-cane rods with a casting weight of about 2 grammes. In those days it was normal practice to determine the optimum casting weight of split-cane spinning rods - which for a slender and fragile cane rod was usually also the maximum casting weight - by measuring their test curve and dividing that by 50 (whereas in Britain, especially with carp rods, the optimum casting weight in ounces as a rule equals its test curve in pounds, which is dividing it by only 16). The rods Barbellion used for his UL spinning had test curves of only 90 or 100 grammes.

The term *lancer ultra-léger* (ultra-light casting) was first used in angling literature



Dr P. Barbellion, *Lancer léger et poissons de sport* (1941), second edition (1946).

by Pierre Lacouche in his book *Le lancer léger de surface* ('Light surface casting' - I'll explain that below), published in 1945. One year later Sylvain Massé published his book *Au léger - ultra-léger* ('Going light and ultra-light') in which he defined UL spinning as casting with lures and other weights up to 2 grammes and further developed and described this technique.

UL spinning as practised by the French in those days was mainly aimed at fishing for trout and perch with tiny spinners and spinner-fly combinations in small streams and brooklets. This kind of fishing was called *lancer de surface*, literally translated 'surface casting'. But in practice it meant spinning in the upper water layers, as opposed to the older practice of spinning near the bottom. The thought behind this was that predators concentrated their attacks on these upper waters layers, because that's where the fry flees when





*Three Pezon & Michel split-cane UL spinning rods,
two UL Mitchell 308 reels and a Crack 100.*

it's chased. But also spinning higher up in the water is more suitable when light and ultra-light lures are used, especially when fishing in a current that pushes them up, while things like devons and heavy spoons are more apt to be fished near the bottom.

In the first decade after the war French rod builders developed a whole range of spinning rods for the new ultra-light techniques. These fragile split-cane rods had test curves of 60, 80, 90 and 100 grammes, so their optimum casting weights ranged from 1.2 up to 2 grammes. The leading manufacturer was the famous firm of Pezon & Michel, who brought out their first UL spinning rods in 1948. By that time the same firm also produced a superior spinning reel, light enough to be used on these UL rods: the original Luxor (model 1936). It weighed only 225 grammes (8oz) and had a synthetic spool. Soon it was succeeded by a slightly more robust version with an aluminium spool, the Luxor-Luxe (260 grammes).

UL spinning in Holland

By the early 1950s Pezon & Michel tackle was also available on the Dutch market. In the Netherlands, writer and rod builder Jan Schreiner was a great advocate of lighter, more refined and more ethical ways of angling. Schreiner's influence in the first three decades after the war has been immense. In 1950 he published the first edition of his book *Flitsend Nylon* ('Flashing Nylon'), in which several Pezon & Michel rods and reels were pictured and various UL techniques were discussed, and from then on he more or less guided the nation towards modern angling in all its aspects. Schreiner loved UL spinning and he was responsible for introducing and developing the technique in Holland. The Dutch polders, with their shallow waters, were very much suited to it.



Three fibreglass UL spinning rods from the 1960s, made by Jan Schreiner.

Yet the availability of suitable tackle and fishing waters, and the guidance of a knowledgeable angling publicist were not the only conditions necessary for the rise of UL fishing. The first thing that had to change was mentality. Here too Jan Schreiner made an invaluable contribution,

by promoting angling as a sport instead of just explaining how to catch as many fish as possible. Changing the attitude of anglers and turning them away from the coarse and heavy tactics and tackle they were used to opened the door to new techniques. Fishing was no longer done 'for the pot' but for the excitement and joy of the game itself. Without this change in attitude the introduction of UL fishing would hardly have stood a chance, as it would have been dismissed as frivolous nonsense and not the most safe and productive way to fill a hessian bag with fish.

As early as 1950 Jan Schreiner wrote with passion about his adventures with UL spinning. He used tiny spinners with a fly tied on the single hook, which he fished on 4 or 6 grammes casting weight spinning rods and lines of 0.12 to 0.16mm thickness. With these he caught mainly perch and sometimes small pike, but also rudd and the occasional zander. Although he fished mainly in the polders, which were largely populated with perch and smaller pike, inevitably a bigger pike sometimes grabbed his lure as well. In those early years he had already caught them up to 10 pounds (metric) and he had done so on 0.14mm nylon, which in 1950 pulled only 0.8 kilo - less than 2lb! Schreiner thought highly of UL spinning and of the skills needed for it. To him it was certainly no less refined and challenging than fly fishing. I believe he was right. And I'd like to conclude with one of his remarks:

'Limiting myself to ultra-light spinning, I can say this: such an ultra-light outfit should be considered as indispensable equipment. Certainly for anglers who love fishing in the polders. Because with a tiny spinner, fished correctly, one rarely misses out. Is that truly so, Schreiner?'

'Upon my soul, it is.'

'If it really would be my soul that was at stake, only to be saved by catching some fish'

in the polder, I would choose the ultra-light rod and the tiny spinner as my safest weapon. Just to keep this risk - for my soul - as small as possible.'

And what about the UK?

In Britain, as in Holland, anglers vary widely in their attitudes and preferences. Today for the vast majority of anglers in both countries the importance of quantitative results seems to outweigh the enjoyment in the quality of fishing itself. These anglers

very much value the weight of their fish - one ounce short of a 'twenty' is often a disappointment - as well as the importance of records and the status derived from it. On the other side of the spectrum we find anglers like Chris Yates, who are satisfied to simply enjoy some beautiful fishing. I believe UL spinning would comply more with the attitude of the latter group. This is probably why the UL technique never gained a wide acceptance in Britain, where anglers are more inclined to choose their tackle on the safe side. From

the 1970s onwards this competitive tendency has influenced fishing on the Continent as well. In Holland the popularity of UL spinning has been declining gradually since that time, against the increasing preference for specimen hunting, adapted from the UK. But fortunately the tide seems to have been turning in the past decade.

Although UL spinning may not be a technique favoured by a large group of British anglers, it does have its history in the UK. The French were quite aware of

UL lures. Left to right: two home-made fly-spinners, two Veltic spinners, 4g ABU Toby, and 4g Orlac spoon. Bottom: Blue Fox lure and sea-trout spoon made from a teaspoon handle.



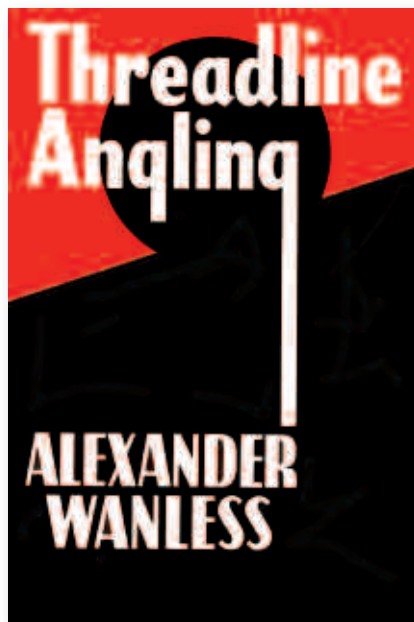
this from the start - probably more so than the British themselves. In the preface to a book called *Les techniques modernes du lancer* ('Modern casting techniques'), first published in 1950, the famous French angler Louis Carrère writes:

'Venesmes and Huillet [both mentioned here before] have advised us on very light rods, very thin gut and lures of just a few grams. We recognise in their works the technique of Wanless, the best known father of our sport. Strangely enough Wanless doesn't seem to have found fertile ground in England for making light spinning popular. In France, on the contrary, this style of fishing counts a great number of followers ...'

Wanless? Does it ring a bell? It still did so for some in the 1970s. In those days Barrie Rickards and Ken Whitehead had a serious go at UL spinning. They wrote about it in *Spinning and Plug Fishing* (1987). Their experiments started after Ken had one day witnessed some of the finest casting, spinning and playing techniques he had ever seen. They were performed by a man fishing for sea-trout on the river Towy with a very short and fragile rod, a small Altex spinning reel, a line of probably no more than 2lb breaking strain and a small Mepps spinner. After a good fish had taken his lure, the man displayed great skill in playing it, giving it a nearly slack line every time the fish made a run.

On the second time that this trick was used Ken realised he was watching a vintage performance - and suddenly also realised where he had seen the style described. It was straight from the pages of an Alexander Wanless book.

After returning home, Ken said he contacted a seller of antiquarian books and managed to assemble a complete collection of Wanless' works (if that's true, it must have been some investment, as I've counted seventeen different titles,



Alexander Wanless, Threadline Angling (1933).

published between 1930 and 1953). Starting from there, he and Barry had their go at UL spinning. More about this shortly, but first back to Wanless.

Alexander 'Alec' Wanless, was a Scotsman, born in Hawick in 1889; he died in Dunblane in 1952. He was the father of what, from the early 1930s into the 1950s, was called 'threadline angling': fishing (usually spinning) with a stationary drum spinning reel and light lines (in those days the word 'threadline' was used for lines with a breaking strain of 6lb or less). Wanless published his famous book *Threadline Angling* in 1933 and many more books on the subject followed after that. This threadline angling may not always have been truly ultra-light spinning, at least not by our definition of using rods of up to ¼ oz casting weight, although Wanless himself usually kept his lures and casting weights below that. But it certainly could

be called ultra-light in a relative way, as Wanless often used 2lb lines for his trout fishing and 6lb to catch salmon. This was where his typical playing technique came in, of not countering runs, but giving a running fish almost slack line.

Apart from his UL spinning and playing techniques Wanless was known for a small item he had developed: the controller. These controllers were thin cigar-shaped casting weights, 3½ to 5 inches long and weighing 2, 4 or 6 drams (about 3.5 to 10.5 grammes; for most of his fishing Wanless preferred the 2 dram ones). They were used, when fishing for trout, grayling and salmon, to cast flies with a spinning rod - to many fly fishermen an abominable and despicable practice! Wanless made his first controllers of a piece of yellow garden cane. Then came the wooden controllers and finally, after the war, he handcrafted his controllers of translucent synthetic material: Perspex (Plexiglas) for the sinking ones and Alkathene (polyethylene) for the ones that would just float. Although these controllers never received wide acceptance in Wanless' own days and seemed to be forgotten altogether by the 1960s, they were reinvented in the last decades in the form of sbirilino's or bombardas and similar casting weights, which were developed for trout fishing but are now popular for many other techniques as well. A clever and inventive man, Wanless was.

Still, being a threadline angler wasn't always easy in the old days (and in practice even less so before the first nylon monofilament fishing lines became available in 1946). Threadline anglers were sometimes sneered at as 'easy-way-anglers' by the centre-pin and fly-reel men, as if no skill was needed for using a fixed-spool reel and any fool could catch fish that way. But to even present flies (or, god forbid, worms) to game fish with a spinning rod, spinning reel and controllers was



Modern UL spinning tackle from the USA: a 5'6" carbon St Croix rod and Penn Spinfisher 420 SSG reel.

by some considered as nothing less than poaching. No wonder that in his own country Wanless drew a storm of criticism for his threadline methods, including an on-going feud with major Kenneth Dawson in the *Fishing Gazette*. In Britain he never got the wide-spread appreciation for his ideas that he deserved. But at least he was more respected on the Continent.

Yet Ken Whitehead and Barrie Rickards certainly knew enough about Wanless to appreciate him. They made their own equivalents of Wanless' slender rods by taking 7-foot Fibatube glass fly-rod blanks for a 4-weight line and transferred them into UL spinning rods. On 2 and 4 lb lines they then presented all sorts of tiny lures to perch and chub and had great sport, especially when pike joined in the game. Applying Wanless' playing method, most of these bigger fish could be subdued on UL tackle. But not all of them.

Of course, there comes the moment of truth in this situation as in any other, when

a fish just keeps going despite all the line pressure you dare give, and though the rod be bent nearly double. But that is a great part of the pleasure of angling, and if a break should occur, then reason with yourself that had it not been for the light-weight approach, then possibly the fish would not have been hooked in the first place.

Whether it's done only when other, heavier techniques are less successful, or rather whenever it's possible, UL spinning is always a relief. Or as Rickards and Whitehead put it: 'Just a little rod, a reel, and two small boxes of tiny lures or mounted minnows can provide a staggering day's sport.'

UL spinning today

Today, I believe, UL spinning remains largely a niche sport in the UK. In Holland it's about the same, although gradually its popularity seems to be rising again. In the USA ultra-light fishing and its slightly less

extreme variant 'finesse angling' are more widely appreciated and practised. And many innovations in this field can be found there, as well as suitable UL spinning tackle.

But there's one country in Europe where UL techniques have gained a wide acceptance and where they flourish today: Denmark. Here UL spinning is done primarily for sea-trout, but because of its popularity it has of course also spread to other types of fishing. The technique was developed in the early 1980s by biologist Axel Thomsen from Odense, who started fishing for sea trout with a 9-foot UL spinning rod made from a lissom Orvis carbon fly-rod blank. He used mostly 0.18 nylon lines to cast homemade spoons that weighed no more than 4 to 7 grammes. These tiny lures were initially made of tea-spoon handles. Their resemblance to small baitfish, like sticklebacks, and their inconspicuous presentation were probably the main reason for their success. As a contributor to that classic sea trout book

Sølvtoj ('Silverware', the Danish nickname for sea-trout) Thomsen wrote in 1981:

'I'm convinced that the future in Danish coast fishing is to light tackle. This light tackle has increased my catch fivefold, and at the moment I'm experimenting with 0.15 line on my spool, 4 gram spoons or a Mepps nr. 0 spinner. My casting is getting shorter and shorter, but I'm catching more and more fish!'

Today most Danish UL spinning enthusiasts favour shorter rods of around 4½- to 6-foot, rather than the 9- to 10-foot rods of the 1980s and 90s. But even in

Denmark some anglers needed time to adapt. On the Danish *Lystfisker* forum knife maker Ib Dyhr from Aalborg wrote about his sea trout fishing in 2002:

'When I first met other anglers on the coast, they stared in disbelief at my 4.8 ft. rod and my mini reel and they almost lapsed into a coma when they heard that I was using 0.14mm nylon line and that my spoons weighed 4-6 gram!'

Indeed UL spinning is not for everyone - this may sound arrogant, but I don't mean it like that at all. I don't believe any one

angling technique to be in itself superior to another, as long as it's fair to the fish. Anglers choose the techniques that personally suit them best, for many different reasons. And any such technique may be performed to perfection or bungled, that depends on the angler. But I do believe that when it comes to enjoying angling, for those anglers who have freed themselves of the pressure of competition and the urge to achieve, and who know how to appreciate refinement and style as well as breathtaking battles, UL spinning has everything to offer. ■



*Axel Thomsen with a 5.2 kilo sea trout, caught on UL spinning tackle in the spring of 1981. A picture taken from the Danish book *Sølvtoj* (1981).*