

# Simply Irresistible

The history and tying techniques behind one of the sport's standard dry-fly patterns

by Joe Messenger

It was during the days when B-17s, B-24s, Mustangs, and Lightnings roamed the skies over Europe and the Pacific that a letter arrived for my dad, addressed to "Joe Messenger, Fly Tyer, Morgantown, West Virginia." It read, "Dear Mr. Messenger, Please send me more of your deer-hair drake flies. The trout up in Canada find them to be . . . irresistible."

America was consumed by World War II and many of our country's fishermen were overseas fighting in that conflict. Payne, Dickerson and Garrison built fine fly rods then and some progress was being made in the field of fly tying. But, for the most part, the events of the war overshadowed any other achievement worthy of attention.

Art Neu, a friend of my father's and a champion fly caster, had written to dad asking him if he had any new trout-fly patterns that he could send to a friend who was hospitalized at the time. Dad had been tying a deer-hair

drake pattern for trout since the late 1930s, but had not yet settled on a name for it, and he sent some of the drakes to Neu's friend, Ken Lockwood. When Lockwood recovered from his illness, he headed for Canada and some fishing. When he returned, he wrote to my father, requesting more of the flies he described as "irresistible." The name stuck, and in the years to come, the fly became a favorite of fly fishermen world wide.

My father was born in 1892, and grew up in the mountains and along the streams of West Virginia. The Potomac River flows near the small town of Beryl, where he was born, and it provided a stimulating setting for his early interest in nature. Many summer days of his youth were spent on and in the Potomac, both fishing and observing and learning basics that later provided a foundation for the course of his life.

As a teenager, my father worked as a coal miner and was soon after called

to serve in the U.S. Army, during World War I. While in France in 1919, he received a serious wound. He eventually recovered, and returned home at the war's end to resume his work as a miner. He began tying flies before his military duty, and upon his return from the war he continued fishing and fly tying with a renewed outlook and purpose.

Dad's war injuries returned to trouble him in the years that followed and he spent several of those years in veteran's hospitals, undergoing operations and rehabilitation. He was no longer able to work in the coal mines.

The doctors told him that because of the injuries to and resulting infection in his hip joint, he would be confined to a wheelchair or, at best, he would have to use crutches for the rest of his life. But, dad had other ideas. The doctors released him and told him to go chase rainbows, and that's just what he had in mind, but his rainbows were of the



finny variety.

He modified his old Hudson car so he could operate the clutch with a hand lever. He removed the back seat, built a fly-tying bench in its place. Live roosters were carried in a coop in the trunk of the car, and, no matter how objectionable it might have been to the roosters, he plucked hackles as he needed them. When a rooster was picked clean of its hackles, a streamside chicken dinner often followed.

Dad made screens to fit in the rear windows of the Hudson and installed a bright dome light over his tying bench. The light attracted flying insects at night. They would alight on the screens and Dad studied them and made drawings of them, later attempting to create imitations of them with hook, feather and fur. With the aid of crutches, he fished by day and worked on drawings and tying at night. In time, he was able to get around well using only a cane.

My father's earliest efforts at fly tying involved bass patterns. Frogs, a favorite food of bass, inspired a lure he created with deer hair, called a Bucktail Frog (*this fly is popularly known as the Messinger Frog.—ed.*). The early part of this century offered little in the way of information or materials for fly tying and because deer hair was readily available, dad made good use of it. Another bass pattern he created in the 1920s was called a Nitehummer. It had a deer-hair tail, wings and beard, and the body was clipped deer hair. This pattern was the foundation of the Irresistible.

#### UNUSUAL TECHNIQUES

The method dad created for tying deer hair was both unique and original. Bodies are tied by placing the hook in the vise vertically and with the left hand, holding the hair parallel to the hookshank. The tying thread is brought

from the spool to the tyer's teeth and the tag end is taken around the hook shank and hair. A single overhand knot is then tied to secure the hair to the hook. The vise is rotated 180 degrees and the threads (tag and standing ends) are crossed in front of the bunch of hair and behind the hook shank so that the standing end is to the tyer's left and the tag end is to his right. Pressure is applied laterally and down which locks the hair in place and compacts it, while also separating the colors. The next bunch of hair (darker color for the back and white for the belly) is now ready to be tied on. About six bunches of hair are used to build the body for a size 12 Irresistible. The method creates a very compact and durable fly body. It also allows lateral as well as radial color separation.

If you are confused, you are not alone. I have attempted to explain this technique to other tyers for years now with little success. It's somewhat like

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trying to explain to someone how to pat your head, rub your belly and whistle "Dixie" all at the same time. (In a subsequent article about the Bucktail Frog, I will describe the technique with graphic detail of the individual steps.) I've made a video tape that hopefully clears up most of the confusion.

## WHICH MAYFLY IS IT?

In my father's own words, "The Irresistible is an imitation of an egg-laden female drake fly." I am not sure exactly which species of drake fly it is intended to imitate. The original pattern has brown deer hair tails and wings, blue-grey (dun) hair for the back and white deer hair on the underside. The hackle is a dyed claret or wine color. Later, he offered the Irresistible with a brown back and hackle and ginger back and hackle.

The major drake hatch here in West Virginia, and the east, is the green drake (*Ephemera guttulata*). The Irresistible does not closely resemble the natural in either shape or color. There is a western brown drake that is chunkier and more compact than the eastern variety, but Dad never fished in the West, so I don't think that would have influenced his choice of shape or color.

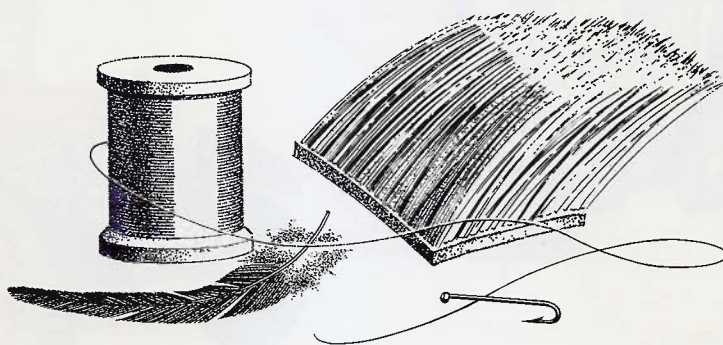
Although I don't know the reason for his choice of shape and color, I do know that fishermen have been catching trout on the Irresistible for about fifty years. I realize that if someone has a favorite fly, they will catch the majority of their fish on that pattern simply because it is used more often and with more confidence than others. On many occasions over the years while trout fishing, I have given equal time to the Irresistible tied in a wide variety of colors, including pink, but the smokey-blue pattern with claret

hackle and white abdomen has consistently taken more trout for me than any of the other colors.

From an entomological standpoint, the Irresistible is certainly not exact. But, that's not so bad. The Adams, perhaps the most-often-used dry fly of

chances are very good that the fly was tied by my father. It could be one of mine, but he was a much more prolific tyer than I am, so it is probably one of his Irresistibles.

Aesthetically, I think Irresistibles tied with a dark back-and-white belly



all time, does not closely match a specific insect, yet countless trout have been taken on the Adams due to its effectiveness. There are many fly patterns that fit into this category.

## TYING NUANCES

The basic difference between my father's original tie and those tied by others is the method of tying on the body. As I explained earlier, dad's technique allowed lateral color separation and with few exceptions, the Irresistibles he tied had white abdomens. Spinning deer hair onto a hook does not allow this lateral separation. Stacking does make lateral color separation possible, but I have never seen a contemporary Irresistible tied with a stacked body. I am only mildly familiar with the stacking technique, and am not sure that the method works well on size 12 or smaller hooks. If you are in possession of an Irresistible with lateral color separation,

are more pleasing than those that have a body spun from a single color, but more importantly, dad's tying method offered a fly with great durability. Spinning or stacking makes use of a single thread to attach the hair to the hook shank through the length of the body. The thread is then tied off with a single knot, either a whip finish or a half hitch. If the single thread holding the hair to the hook breaks or the single knot fails, the structural integrity of the entire body is lost and the fly can come apart.

My father's method used a modified square knot to attach each bunch of hair to the hook. Smaller amounts of hair are used in each bunch because of the two colors that make up the fly body. If six bunches of hair are used to build the body, then seven knots (the seventh being a square knot tied to finish things off) are needed to hold the hair on the hook shank. If the thread should break because of the

stresses involved in fishing, very little, if any, damage results. Also, the thread used for tying with dad's method is heavier and stronger than that usually used to spin deer hair on small flies. For the last five years or so, I have used Kevlar thread.

The method of tying the tail and wings are the same no matter which body-tying technique is used. As far as I know, my father never owned a fly-tying bobbin; he preferred to place the spool of thread on a finish nail driven into his bench top and control the thread pressure with his fingers. As a matter of fact, he didn't even use a vise for most of the trout fly patterns that he tied, but the Irresistible is an exception. Because I'm not the staunch individual that he was, I use a bobbin and vise.

## TYING INSTRUCTIONS

Here's how I tie the Irresistible. Using a size 8 through 16 either Mustad 7957B, 9671 or Tiemco 5262 hook, attach size 8/0 (6/0 for size 8 & 10 hooks) black, polyester thread to the midpoint of the hook shank and wind it back to a point directly above the barb of the hook. Then wind it forward a third of the shank length.

Select a medium amount of fine (mask or perhaps coastal), brown deer hair for the tail and pick out the fuzz and shorter hair.

Place the hair in a stacker and even up the ends. Set the hair atop the hook shank and secure it with several thread wraps at the point where the bobbin now hangs. The tail should be the same length as the hook shank.

Apply slight upward pressure on the hair and wind the thread back to the point above the barb. Then wrap the thread up the hook shank to the midpoint and make whip finish.

Don't tie on the wings at this stage of the operation.

Apply a drop or two of Dave's Flexament over the thread wraps and allow it to dry.

Now tie on the body using fairly coarse deer hair, which trims and floats better than the fine stuff. I use my dad's method of tying which I explained briefly earlier to bring the body two-thirds of the way up the hook shank. Whatever method you use to tie the body, make sure that you cover the winding at the base of tail with the hair for the body. If you don't cover those wraps, the thread holding the tail on will show and make for a bad looking fly.

Next, take the fly out of the vise and begin trimming the body with straight scissors and taper it back toward the tail.

After the body is roughly shaped with the scissors, I make use of a technique that I learned from a friend, Jimmy Nix. (I've also acquired some bad habits from Jimmy that are not fly-fishing or fly-tying related, but this is a good one.) Use a razor blade for the final shaping of the body. (*Razor blades, especially double-edge blades, are extremely sharp, so use caution when handling them.*-ed.) Quite subtle changes can be made with the blade and with some practice, a nicely-trimmed deer-hair body shape can be achieved.

Trim the underside of the body a little thinner than the back. This exposes more of the hook gape and increases the fly's hooking ability. It also helps make the fly ride better in the water.

The front of the body should be trimmed to a flat face or shoulder. You may shorten the body somewhat by doing this, but if you have taken the body two-thirds of the way up the hook

shank, this will allow you to remove some of the hair in front and still have a well proportioned finished fly. The flat face or shoulder helps the hackle stand at right angles to the hook shank, which helps the fly ride better in the water and improves its appearance.

Next, tie on the wings, using the same type of hair as you selected for the tail. Use about twice the amount of hair that you used for the tail.

Clean the fuzz and short hairs from the wing hair and stack it.

Tie on the 8/0 thread and bring it back to a point halfway between the eye of the hook and the body. Make the wings the same length as the hook shank.

Hold the hair, tip it toward the eye with your right hand and take three or four loops of thread around it with your left hand. Begin with soft or loose loops and gradually add tension as you proceed.

Release the hair with your right hand and grasp it by the butt ends with your left hand. Hold the hair firmly in place and take about six more tight turns around it with the thread.

Stroke the hair back away from the hook eye and make five or six tight turns against the front portion of the hair. This enables the wings to stand upright.

Now trim the butt ends of the hair as close to the hook shank as possible without cutting the thread. Take several more turns of thread around the trimmed ends.

Bunch the hair up atop the hook shank, and, using a bodkin, divide it into two equal amounts.

While holding the right wing, take two turns of thread around the left wing. Now hold the left wing and take two turns around the right wing. Make sure the loops of thread are down near

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the base of the wings. Don't make the turns so tight that they cause the hair to flare a lot.

Make figure-eight wraps around the wings and the hook shank to secure everything and you're ready to tie on the hackle.

The Irresistible looks better and rides better in the water when it is heavily hackled, so, depending upon the quality of the hackle that is used, select two or three hackles with fibers one and a half times as long as the hook gape.

Strip the fluff and web from the hackle stems. Place the hackles together, with the butt portions even.

With the dull side of the hackle facing forward, tie on the hackle stems in the area of the fly between the wings and body and then wind the thread forward to secure the hackle stems between the wings and the eye of the hook. Clip off the excess stems—I use a scalpel or razor blade for this. Apply a drop of Flexament to this area and allow it to dry.

Wind the hackles forward, beginning with the hackle nearest the wings and take several turns of hackle in front of the wings. Tie the hackle off with two wraps and clip off the remaining tip.

Continue winding the hackles, trying not to overlap the hackle that has been previously wound.

After the last hackle has been secured, pull all the hackle fibers back, and take several more thread wraps near the eye of the hook. Apply a whip finish.

Place a drop of head cement on the thread, and you are finished.

The Irresistible has been around for a long time. Through the years it has found a place in the fly boxes of many

fishermen and it has taken lots of trout for them. This fly is in it's glory in fast and turbulent water that will sink most standard dry flies, and when it's tied properly, the Irresistible offers durability and low-maintenance performance.

Sure, I'm biased. Dad was my hero and my best friend. He never had an axe to grind with anyone and fame and fortune were not his objectives in life. The flies that he created were simply a product of his best efforts to enhance the time he spent on a mountain trout stream or a pretty bass lake or river.

My father died when I was 22 years old. He was 74. I'm now 46 and I still miss him. I wish some day I could pack up my gear, take along a little extra lunch and head for one of his favorite trout streams here in West Virginia. I'd give a whistle, and he would join me for some lunch and later we would try our luck with the local trout.


As usual, he would open up his fly box and take out several flies for me to use. I'm sure one of them would be his deer-hair drake fly. I know he'd hand it to me with a little grin and say, "Here, Joe, try this one. Maybe these trout will find it to be . . . simply irresistible."



*Joe Messinger is a second-generation professional fly tyer. His father, Joe Messinger, Sr., originated a number of deer-hair flies for bass and trout. Of these flies, patterns such as the Irresistible and Bucktail Frog have become standards that are tied and fished widely today. Joe still ties these patterns using the techniques originated by his father. We'll present the tying techniques in greater detail in a future issue when he describes the Bucktail Frog.*



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