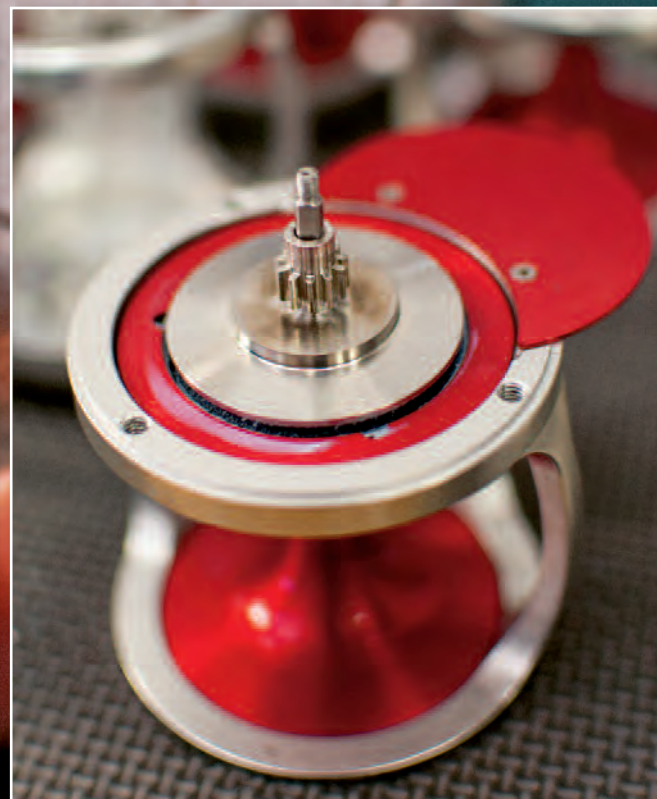


# HOOKED ON A Virginia Reel



Wes Seigler, President of Innovative Anglers



Fishing can be a very simple activity. You just need bait, a rod, some line, and a little luck. But humans are curious and imaginative creatures, and rarely do we remain content with the small, farm-pond bream of our youth. We seek something larger and dream of the possibilities of fishing bigger water and snagging bigger fish. Ironically, we find ourselves hooked by these dreams that lead us to more complicated fishing.

This is not your typical fishing story. It is a little more than that. It is a story about people who caught an idea and believed in it. They believed in it so much that, even though

story by Clarke C. Jones  
photos by Patricia R. Jones

they had no idea how to do what they wanted to do, they went ahead and did it anyway. They jumped in and started their own business crafting fishing reels.

"My business partner, Ken Nance, and I fish. But we saw that even if we took care of our reels, they would deteriorate. We knew there had to be a better way to make fishing reels," says Wes Seigler, former international bicycle racer and now president of Innovative Anglers in Reedville.

Wes knew some of the people at Shimano, the international manufacturer of cycling and fishing equipment, from his racing days and asked them about the steps required to build fishing reels. They encouraged him to construct his own. Everyone thinks that if you want to compete in today's market, your product must be produced cheaply. So Wes traveled to Asia to look for factories where he could outsource the manufacturing of reel parts.







Todd Coryell, the "figurer out of everything," works on a new reel design.

There are some things that no one tells a novice entrepreneur about doing business overseas. If your goal is to make the very best fishing reel possible, quality control is obviously very important. As a small business on an even smaller budget, you quickly understand that you will never have enough money in your checking account to keep flying back and forth to Asia to regularly oversee production.

Seigler explained an even bigger problem. "Once you present your designs for a part to the parts manufacturer, you soon realize that the parts you designed are beginning to show up on reels by other manufacturers. After this happened several times, I said, 'Enough of this!'" Wes and Ken then considered outsourcing the parts manufacturing to companies here in the United States. However, because they were a startup operation ordering small, specialized batches, the lead time to make a part was often between two weeks and four months.

At this point, many of us may have just thrown in the towel, but Wes made a bold decision to not only bring the manufacturing back to the United States, but bring it to Reedville. "I can tell you... this decision was a huge nightmare," emphasizes Seigler. "We did not know how to do this, as we knew *nothing* about manufacturing and had to learn everything firsthand. We didn't know the difference

between end mills and drill bits. We knew we needed to buy certain machines, but did not know how to make them work." He adds, "I had to go to a computer class to learn how to draw on a computer!"

Recognizing that Innovative Anglers would need to have their own machinery to create the reel components to their specifications, more money had to be invested to purchase CNC (computer numerical control) machines. "When the manufacturer's representative came to our shop to follow up on the order," says Seigler, "he asked us what we needed. We told him he needed to show us how to turn on the machine. He stood there somewhat dumbfounded and said, 'You are kidding!' We said 'No.'"

Wes continues, "He looked at us again and pointed to the two machines and said, 'If you don't know what you are doing, *this* machine can kill *you*, and the *other* machine—if you don't know what you are doing—you can kill *it*!'"

Wes and Ken had thought that if you had the appropriate machines, all you had to do was insert a chunk of metal, push a button, and the finished part emerged. For quite a while after that visit, Kenny and Wes often worked long hours just programming the machines to run, then head home at two or three in the morning. Ken would return a few hours later.

It was at this point that luck threw them a life preserver named Todd Coryell. "Todd has been a machinist for 45 years and has worked on everything, from parts of the space shuttle to parts for submarines. Our company was using the company in Maryland, where he worked, as an outsourcer of parts. He came out with one of our parts and told us he did not like the way the part was working, and when he fishes, he wants his reel to do this and that," Wes recalls.

"I knew Todd cared—not just about making a part—but cared about making the product better. I saw that he had the same mindset as Kenny and I did."

Todd, whom Wes describes as the "Figurer Out of Everything," first commuted and then moved to Reedville. Why did a talented machinist, who had lived in St. Mary's County all his life, relocate to Reedville? Coryell explained that his move gives him the opportunity to teach his trade, which he truly enjoys, and to work on making improvements on what he believes is a great product.

"What we have been able to accomplish in the last year has been truly amazing. With very little to start with in the beginning, we have progressed into a very respectable production."

Todd adds, "We strive to make the best product we possibly can. It's time for Americans to be able to buy something that is truly one hundred percent made in America."

When it came to marketing the reels, Innovative Anglers approached smaller "Mom & Pop" retailers. "We do not ship direct," explains Seigler. "We feel the independent tackle shops have the knowledge of what works in their area and an idea of the type of fishing their customers do, so they are better able to assist their customers and point out the advantages of our reels."

For a business to thrive, it must not only make a first-rate product, it must also build a superior reputation. As Ryan Stephens, the manager of Ace Hardware in Kilmarnock, puts it, "Innovative Anglers builds a quality, American-made product that is sold for reasonable prices and is backed with excellent after-the-sale service from a very knowledgeable staff of people passionate about what they do. That is the kind of company I want our store associated with."

Green Top, a sporting goods institution in central Virginia, has been selling hunting and fishing gear since 1947. Director of Marketing and Advertising Bob Strepka was asked why Green Top would add the Release Reel to

their inventory when they already carry a large variety of fishing supplies. Strepka responds, "First and foremost, the notion that a reel, the size and weight of the Release SG (small game), with the incredible drag capability and line capacity—was available—became a major contributor in our decision." Strepka notes that the Release Reels are machined from billet aluminum, which he feels are better quality than the traditional reels from some major brands on the market that do not stand up well to a saltwater environment. Bob also adds that, "The lifetime warranty, which we do not see traditionally in the fishing reel category—if at all—told us the new company was serious about their product."

Other retailers in Virginia and Maryland are catching on and echo the sentiments of both Ryan Stephens and Bob Strepka. Now, after more than five years of perseverance, determination, long hours, and hard work, Innovative Anglers is selling more reels than the company can make. Their production process runs at full capacity and has moved to a larger facility nearby.

When Innovative Anglers chose the name Release Reels for their product, they saw release fishing as the future and Seigler foresees adding other items to their product

line. "One of our goals for the summer of 2014 is to have a small spinning reel that can be used for speckled trout in the bay to large- and smallmouth bass in fresh water." They are also working on a star drag reel for cat fishermen.

"Our reels will work on catfish." Seigler adds, "But cat fishermen are so used to a star drag reel for those monster cats around Dutch Gap and Hopewell that we figured it is easier to make what a cat fisherman is used to than to try to convince them our reels will work for them."

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So, you've taken a day off and you're fishing. You lazily cast your line in the water and wonder when that fish will bite. As your mind drifts, you begin to think, "Why don't they make it this way?" or "Why don't they do this?" or "Why don't I...?" You can spend the rest of your day waiting for a lucky catch or you can take charge of the situation. Just don't spend the rest of your life telling the same tales about the one that got away. 🎣

*Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at [www.clarkecjones.com](http://www.clarkecjones.com).*



Barbara Saunders programs a Haas Milling machine.



A main reel case is being polished by tiny ceramic beads.



A completed reel is mounted on a fishing rod.