

1942 - 2009

Jack Be Nimble

JACK GARTSIDE LIVED BY A SIMPLE CODE AND BECAME ONE OF THE
SPORT'S TOP AMBASSADORS | **By Ed Mitchell**

ON DEC. 5, 2009, THE INIMITABLE JACK GARTSIDE PASSED AWAY. From sea to shining sea, Jack was one of the finest fly tiers to ever thread a bobbin. Ask anyone; you'll get no argument there. With a magician's touch, he beautifully melded metal and materials into a meaningful whole. Yes, Jack was a real talent. And fortunately for us, he shared his gift for many, many years.

I spoke with Jack over the phone just a few days before he moved on. Despite his weakened state from a battle with lung cancer, Jack was interested in talking, and throughout our conversation, his special spirit was alive and well.

I asked if he felt he was receiving adequate care. Without hesitation, Jack praised the hospital staff and quickly added that he felt blessed by the outpouring of support he had received from so many people in the fly-fishing community. He was truly touched by it.

Jack spoke only briefly about his predicament, never once uttering a single complaint. On the contrary, he remained optimistic that he could regain enough strength to go fishing. Through his 66 years, Jack was forever the angler.

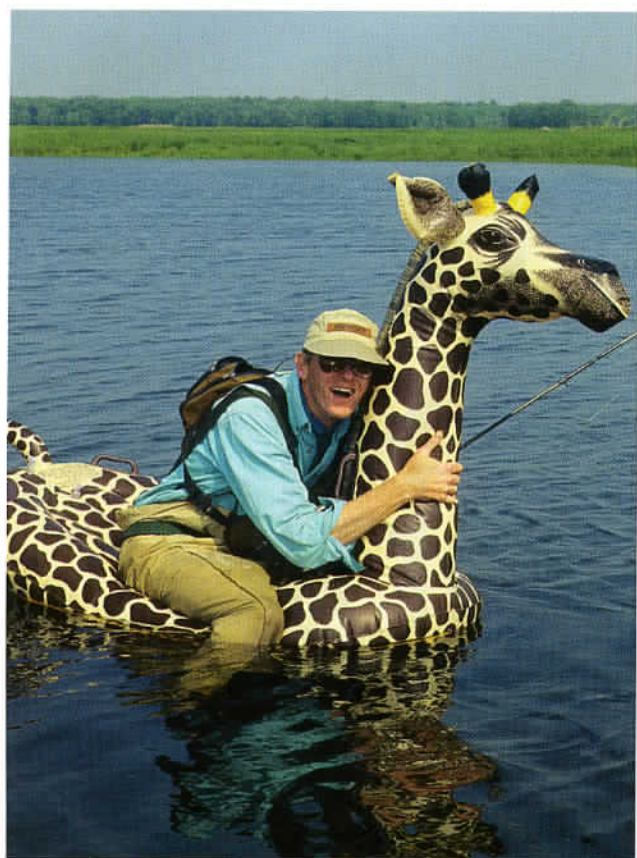
But just then, he switched subjects. For several minutes, Jack expressed concern for a person we both knew — I

found it remarkable that in the ebbing moments of his life, Jack would worry about someone else's problems. He was mighty gracious to the end.

Master of Simplicity

To my eye, Jack's signature fly-tying style involved soft, often breathable materials shaped into lightweight and simple yet durable designs. With a cash flow unlike Bernie Madoff's, Jack was also an economical tier, constantly improvising with things that were readily at hand.

All of these characteristics are apparent in his two most popular saltwater flies, the Gartside Sand Eel and the Gartside Gurgler. To make a Gartside Sand Eel, a tier simply needs thread, a piece of ¼-inch Corsair tubing (an item that Jack introduced to the tying world) and a small amount of flash.



BARRY & CATHY BECK

Hang on, Jack! Gartside's all smiles as he meanders his way through Boston Harbor aboard Gerald, the inflatable giraffe.

From these humble origins, Jack cleverly shaped a fly much like the slender natural. You'll find this imitation in anglers' fly boxes all along the Atlantic. It's a killer diller!

Jack's very popular Gurgler is more of the same medicine. He described it as somewhere between a popper and a slider. A piece of foam, a clump of bucktail and a hackle — bingo, you're in business! When slid across the water's surface, the Gurgler leaves a tantalizing wake, calling bass big-time.

More of Jack's tying mantra can be found in his Bucktail Beauty. At heart a Bucktail Deceiver, it is composed of only three clumps of bucktail: a tail, an underwing and an overwing.

His Soft Hackle Flatwing Streamer is another classic example of the Gartside style. The soft blood-marabou plume hackle makes this baby quiver with life even on the slowest of retrieves. And Jack's Glimmer Fly takes his economical side to extremes. It's constructed solely of 12 strands of Glimmer flash, a material that he helped bring to light.

A Character for the Ages

As much as people loved Jack's fly patterns, they were equally as taken with his unique persona. He was bright, affable, opinionated and quick-witted. Moreover, Jack met the world with a dash of mischief in his eyes.

He also possessed another quality that is difficult to define

As much as people loved Jack's fly patterns, they were equally as taken with his unique persona.

— Jack was different. I don't mean that Jack looked different. Truth is, he typically showed up to tying outings in a suit jacket. But Jack had an unusual aura about him.

From years working in an art department, I can tell you that creative people are often like that. They seem to possess this certain intangible spirit that springs from following their own drummer. And that was Jack — forever steered by his inner muse.

Like all real characters, Gartside often surprised people with his off-beat behavior. Lord knows there are a ton of fun stories about Jack's doings. There's the famous 1981 gig, when he showed up at Logan International Airport in Boston dressed in an outback costume to win a \$1.79 trip to New Zealand. Then there's Jack casting to permit from a Coca-Cola raft. Or how about Jack telling onlookers he's headed to the basement as he ducks under his booth table at a show to sneak a cigarette?

It's one lulu right after another. And along with his antics, Jack could say things off the cuff that would make you laugh out loud.

I remember one such incident in particular. I had stopped to see him at his booth at the Somerset Fly Fishing Show in New Jersey. Jack's friend Kate Lavelle was seated to his right eating something from a paper wrapper. Jokingly, I asked her whether she was going to share with us. Without blinking an eye, Jack pronounced that he partook from only the four principal food groups: caffeine, nicotine, bourbon and grease!

I think much of Jack's unpredictable nature is summed up nicely



in a photograph, snapped by Barry and Cathy Beck, that appeared on the January/February 1996 cover of this very magazine. It shows Jack fishing Boston Harbor. No, not from a center-console or a flats boat, not from a kayak or a canoe — but from an inflatable giraffe that Jack named Gerald.

Riding a child's toy, here was Jack in a long-brim hat, waders and a chest pack, hunched forward like a heron while aiming his fly rod with deadly intent at some unseen quarry. Between his legs, the giraffe's neck rose upward, part prow on a Viking longboat, part Loch Ness monster. It's theater of the absurd — it's pure Marcel Duchamp.

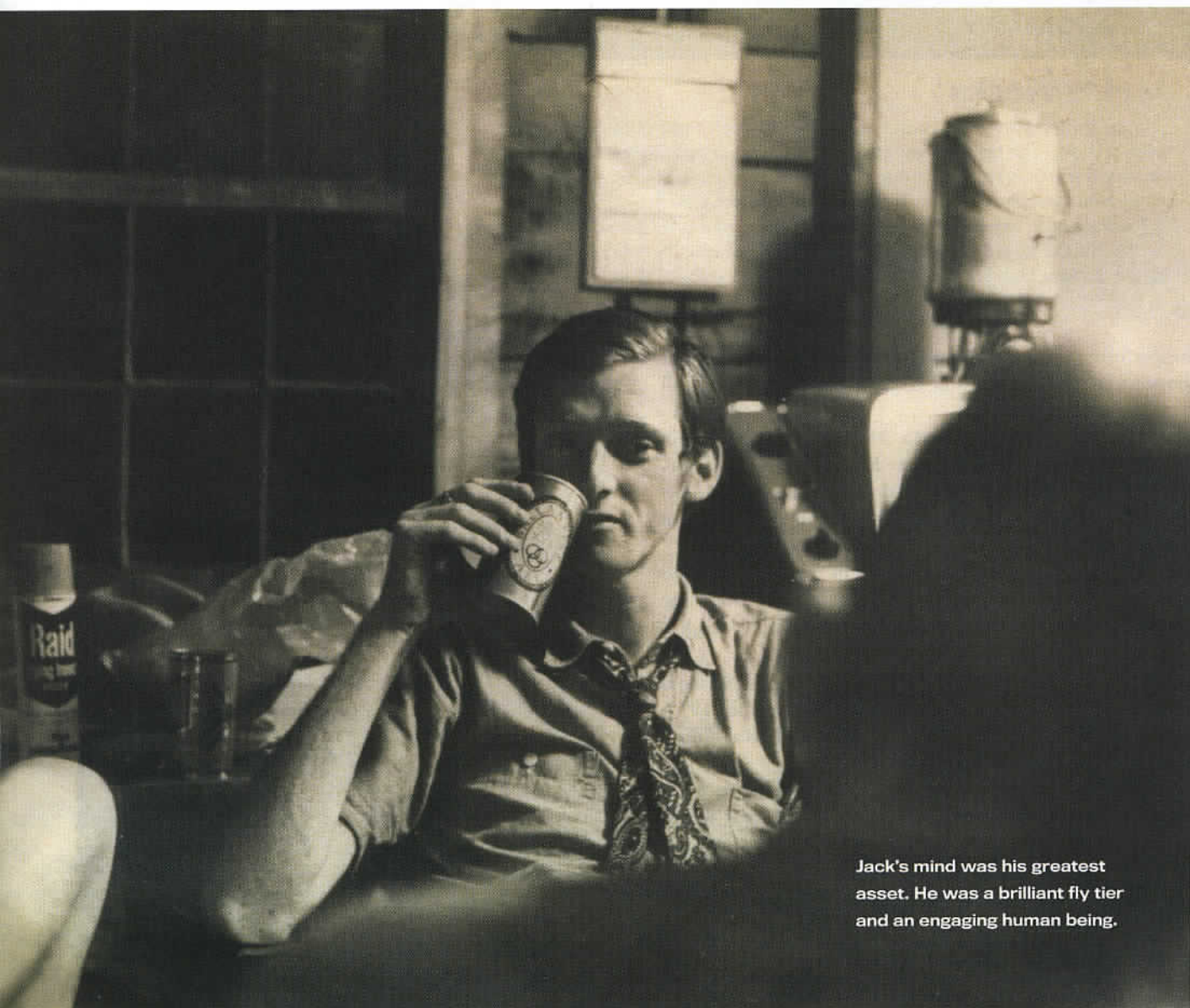
It's Gartside at his quixotic best. In an instant, he poked fun at himself, at us and at anyone else who takes himself too seriously. I heard that particular cover received more reader responses than anything the magazine had ever printed. To this day, many folks have not forgotten it.

The Road Less Traveled

Jack was born just north of Boston on Monday, Dec. 7, 1942, a year to the day after the Pearl Harbor bombing. By his own admission, Jack's school days involved a rash of tardiness, truancy and even the occasional visit to the police station. All of which must have caused consternation for his parents, who were active members of the local Episcopal church.

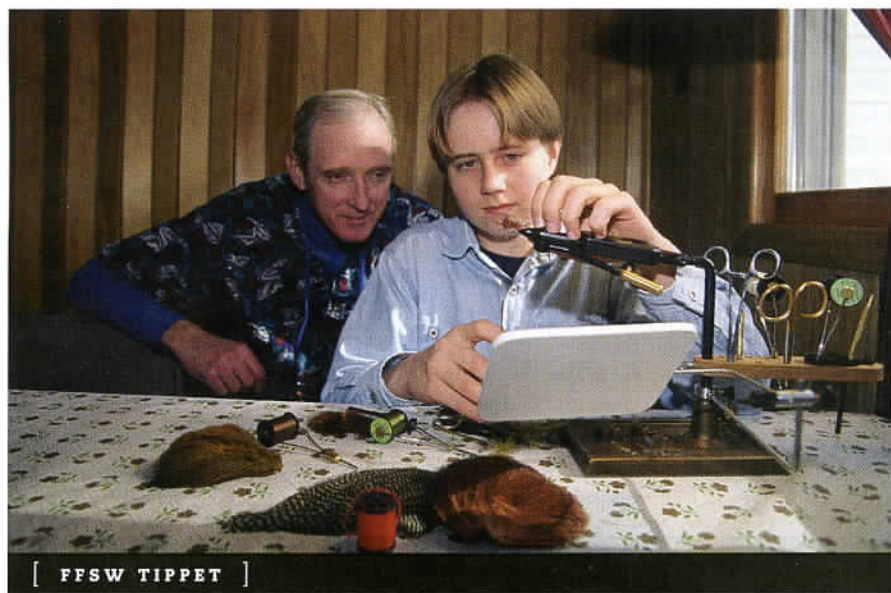
The most defining moment of his boyhood, however, came when young Jack met the great baseball player Ted Williams. If you're under 50 years of age, I'd best put this in perspective for you: For a boy growing up in the Northeast just after the World War II, no bigger man walked the earth than the 6-foot-3-inch giant who swung left-handed for the Red Sox.

Beyond his involvement in baseball, the Splendid Splinter was also a world-class fly-fisherman. And in that capacity,



Jack's mind was his greatest asset. He was a brilliant fly tier and an engaging human being.

COURTESY MIKE QUIGLEY



Jack's Works

While I'm uncertain of the exact order in which Jack's self-published books were printed, I can tell you they were popular enough that several of them went into additional printings. If you don't own any, do yourself a favor — consider going to Jack's website at www.jackgartside.com and picking up one.

The book titles include: *Striper Flies*, *Fly Patterns for the Adventurous Tyer*, *Flies for the 21st Century*, *Striper Strategies*, *Original Salt Water Fly Patterns*, *Scratching the Surface*, *Secret Flies* and *The Fly Fisherman's Guide to Boston Harbor*.

A Star Is Born

For a man bordering on frail, Jack possessed a mountain of courage. With fly-fishing as his North Star, Jack quickly gained a reputation in many circles as a tier of the highest caliber. Perhaps his biggest break came when his flies caught the attention of Eric Leiser, one of fly-tying's most renowned gurus. Eric suggested that his friend Robert Boyle profile Jack for an article in *Sports Illustrated*.

The resulting article appeared in 1982. It was an excellent piece, a fascinating read that put Jack squarely in the limelight. After that article, Jack's patterns began gaining both a national and an international following.

By the time the 1990s rolled around, Gartside's flies were popping up in books left and right. Among those books were Eric Leiser's 1987 work,

he performed fly-casting and fly-tying demonstrations at Boston's Sportsman's Show in the now-gone Mechanics Hall near Copley Square.

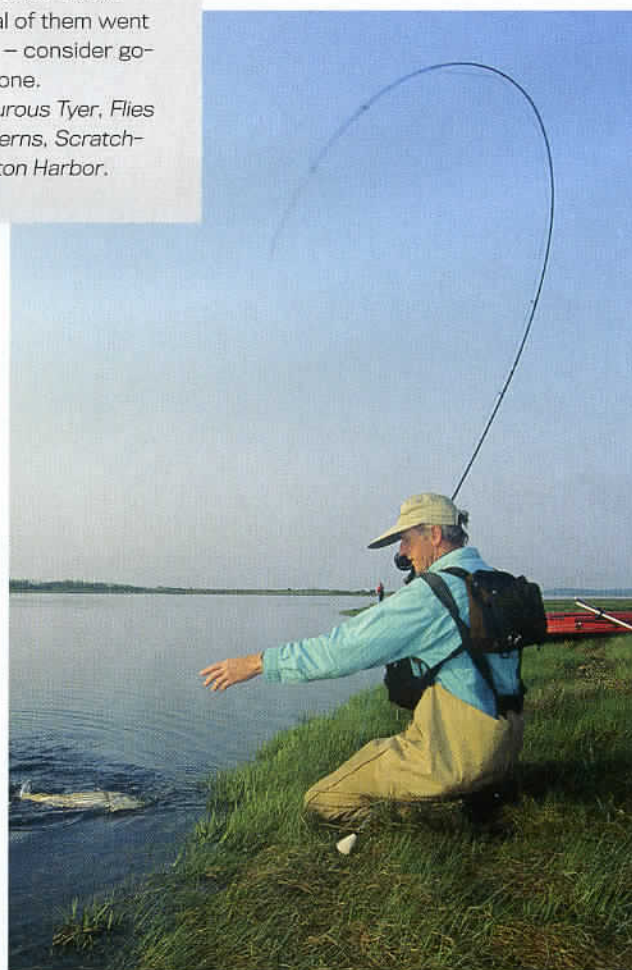
At the 1952 show, Ted, then 34 and already a legend, would see a wide-eyed kid from Revere pushing his way through the crowd. Jack asked Ted to teach him to tie a fly. Ted kindly obliged by whipping up a Woolly Worm. From that moment on, Jack was, in his words, "hooked."

After high school, Jack spent time in the Air Force and went on to the University of Massachusetts, where he received a degree in 1969, then got a job teaching English in a public school.

Jack's life seemed on the straight and narrow in those days, but he was about to tune in, turn on and drop out. In 1975, Jack left teaching behind and began selling his flies and driving a cab, a risky move any way you dice it.

Jack had, in essence, opted out of the mainstream madness for a road less traveled. It was a decision that would force him to live — for the rest of his days — on the margins of society, always just barely scraping by.

Jack's life was no cakewalk. Yet he was willing to ride that ragged edge. He did this because, in spite of the towering challenges, it offered a path to freedom: the freedom to steer his own destiny, the freedom to find his own adventures and the freedom to build his life around his dreams.



Jack lands a nice bass during some field testing of his flies. Many an angler has done the same with a Gartside pattern.

BARRY & CATHY BECK (2)

The Book of Fly Patterns; Dick Stewart and Farrow Allen's 1992 work, *Flies for Saltwater*; Dick Brown's 1993 book, *Fly Fishing for Bonefish*; Lefty Kreh's excellent 1994 work, *Saltwater Fly Patterns*; Deke Meyer's 1995 book, *Saltwater Flies: Over 700 of the Best*; and Terry Tessein's 2003 work, *Fly Fishing Boston*. Jack's flies also appeared in my 1995

during the last few years of his life.

Naturally, those who knew Jack will remember him in their own special way. For me, it's Jack perched in his booth at the Fly Fishing Shows. As I write these words, I can see him there now in a Harris Tweed jacket, with multiple pairs of magnifying glasses dangling from his neck.


Surrounded by an array of items for sale, he begins to carefully craft a fly. Then, as people gather to watch, Jack pauses to reach for a cup of strong coffee residing somewhere in the mess. He takes a sip and follows up with a witty remark, which the crowd

With fly-fishing as his North Star, Jack quickly gained a reputation in many circles as a tier of the highest caliber.

book, *Fly Rodding the Coast*, and my 2001 work, *Fly-Fishing the Saltwater Shoreline*.

Jack augmented his meager income by guiding, as well giving lectures and teaching classes. Sometime in the early 1990s, he also began self-publishing his own books. They were informative spiral-bound paperbacks with black-and-white illustrations. For the most part, they were available through only Jack's website (www.jackgartside.com), which played an increasingly large role in his monetary survival

answers with a bout of spontaneous laughter.

Jack, you always looked so at ease, so natural behind that vise; hell, I thought you'd been there since the planet cooled. 

The author would like to thank Robert Boyle for facts used from his 1982 interview in Sports Illustrated. The article can be viewed in its entirety online at sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1125908/index.htm.

Flies Farther. Floats Higher. Lasts Longer.



THEY SAY DON'T MESS WITH SUCCESS.
BUT WE COULDN'T HELP OURSELVES.
LEGENDARY TRIANGLE TAPER FLY LINES,
NOW WITH J3 COATING.

royalwulff.com
800.328.3638