



Kelly Barefoot, owner of Custom Lures Unlimited, hangs an Ikon crankbait before sealing and painting it. He made his first fishing lure at 9 years of age and now makes a variety of wood, hard-plastic and soft-plastic baits, primarily for bass fishing.

THE ALLURE OF *Custom Baits*

Kelly Barefoot designs and produces lures that catch fish as well as fishermen.

Written by Mike Zlotnicki
Photographed by Melissa McGaw



The growl of an air compressor filling its tank interrupts the morning solitude of Kelly Barefoot's painting station. Dressed in denim pants, blue flannel shirt and baseball cap, Barefoot looks more like a roadie for Pearl Jam than an air brush virtuoso. He reaches over and activates an air filtering system behind his set up.

The air tank shuts off abruptly, and Barefoot fills the tiny cup atop the air brush with green paint and gently depresses the trigger. Invisible wisps of pigment begin to coat a wooden sunfish clamped in a fly vise. In a rhythm and cadence perfected over the years, Barefoot paints, cleans his air brush in a bowl of water, refills with another color, and continues. Seven minutes and 13 colors later a bluegill is done, looking as real as a local pond denizen. It is one of his Ikon crankbaits, one of 20 he is making for Tackle Warehouse, an online retailer. Barefoot and his company, Custom Lures Unlimited, have come a long way.

"I use to paint one lure one color for someone and wasted a lot of time and paint," he says. "Now, it has to be five or more for a vendor. Today, I can knock out 100 to 150 a day sitting here."

Some say the quickest way to kill your passion for a hobby is to make it your profession, but Barefoot has maintained his passion since he started making lures as a child, and he has clear memories of his start.

"Cub Scouts, 9 years old," he says. "Had a project to earn a badge. I made a spoon. It was literally a spoon, a hook and aluminum foil. Didn't catch anything on it that I'm aware of, but I did think it was kind of cool. In the early '80s when I was probably 12 or 13 my dad opened an archery shop in the back yard at our house in Angier. My brother and I used to paint the arrows. Back then you identified the arrows by the paint around the cylinder. If you had a certain color, that was your arrow. So we painted those and then I started messing around with wood in the shop, taking wooden dowels and making some really ugly top-water baits."

After high school, Barefoot matriculated to UNC Wilmington, where he majored in psychology and did "a little" fishing.

"I went off to college and my roommate and I started tying saltwater flies and fishing at Wrightsville Beach and Masonboro Inlet for bluefish and trout and things like that," he says. "We decided

to go to Colorado and went a couple of times and started tying trout flies. Got addicted to that probably '88 through '93. I met my wife, moved back to Raleigh, and the natural transition was saltwater back to fresh, so I started bass fishing in tournaments in '97."

Barefoot also got serious about custom lure making. He started in repainting, taking an old gnarled-up lure and making it new, and that painting remains the favorite part of a now diverse tackle company contained in a 25x25 loft above a detached garage, which he financed by selling his bass boat.

"Long story short, and I've told this story 100 times, Bagley had a lure I really liked, and it was this ugly, ugly blue color," he says, "and it was just absolutely killer on Harris. Killer, killer. But it really was the starting point. I had played with an air brush as a child, just as a hobbyist, never really got into it that much. But, they discontinued that lure color and it made me furious because I could not find them anymore. And you know that feeling. It's not a good feeling when they discontinue something."

Then tournament professional Jeffery Thomas of Broadway asked Barefoot if he could paint some for his use.

"Jeffery, the first day, he called me from the lake and he said, 'you're not going to believe this,' says Barefoot. 'I just caught two 9-pounders on back-to-back casts with that lure you painted for me.' His first and second casts. So that just sort of started a bit of word of mouth. Jeffery is a pretty good salesman for an angler. It kind of started evolving from there."

But in the lure-making world, success can bring silence.

"When you go to a restaurant and have a good steak, what's the first thing you do? You tell people," says Barefoot. "When you've got a great lure what's the first thing you don't do? Tell people. So it's kind of a vicious cycle. You can end up in a shoot-yourself-in-the-foot scenario."

Although Barefoot has had notable professional bass anglers like Mike Iocanelli and Randy Howell on his pro staff, Thomas has been a mainstay throughout.

"He uses me as a guinea pig," says Thomas, who spends close to 100 days a year on the water. "I'm his product development guy. I take it to the water and put it to the test. He doesn't put anything out there that doesn't

work. He looks at things as an artist and an angler. He's a thinker."

From 1998 to 2003 Barefoot just did repaints. If he had a buddy who wanted five or 10 done he'd paint five or 10 lures. In 2003 he started thinking more deeply about the custom lure business because he was winning some tournaments on repaints with the local colors, and that's when he came up with the concept of Custom Lures Unlimited. In 2004 he launched his first website. With success came some serious decisions.

"I started the repaints in 2003 and soon realized it was busier than I wanted it to be," he says. "This is when I was at the Children's Developmental Services Agency [in Wake County]. So, I'm working all day, with two

young kids both in diapers, and coming home and working to 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and then going back to work. I did that for about three years and realized that was not going to cut it. It had to be one or the other."

Barefoot remembers one point having 88 separate orders. This was when he was getting orders over the Internet for repaints. He says there were only five people in the nation doing custom painting at that time.

"It was extremely busy and a stressful time with young kids in preschool and working at a job that I enjoyed," he says. "I remember vividly sitting in a meeting when I was supposed to be taking notes and I was drawing fish and lures and shapes and things like that. I was doodling. I was thinking as I was work-

ing, 'I'm really not fulfilling my promise to these folks.' At the end of '06 I was offered a position at the state level, the highest position I could hope to attain. I came home and told my wife and she said 'that's great' and I told her I quit. She said 'you what?' I said I quit. She said 'OK.' I've got a pretty good wife. She knew what made me happy. I'd been in the psych world for 15 years working with everything from adult schizophrenics down to kids. It wears on you after a while. Once I got in to the administration part I didn't enjoy it as much as I did directly working with families. That's where my passion was."

"So, I resigned in June of that year, '06, and started doing it full time, and I soon realized that even though I was at home and doing

everything I needed to do, I didn't enjoy the repaints as much as I used to. I mean, how many bluegills can one human paint in a lifetime. I could probably do one blindfolded, truth be known. But the painting is still the thing I kind of get lost in. I can be there for six hours or I can be there for 30 minutes; I really don't know the difference. It's the easiest part for me, it comes so easy. I think that's the part that folks think is most complicated. Running the business is the most complicated part. Managing invoices and calling folks and ordering supplies."

Barefoot says he never envisioned his business growing to the level of volume it has attained. And yet, it all comes through the impossibly small shop with magazine and

To watch Kelly Barefoot produce a lure, go to ncwildlife.org/winc and click on videos.

A Lure Comes to Life



STEP 1: Lure design/shape is transferred, drawn, outlined on the wood. The lure shape is cut out using either a band saw or scroll saw.

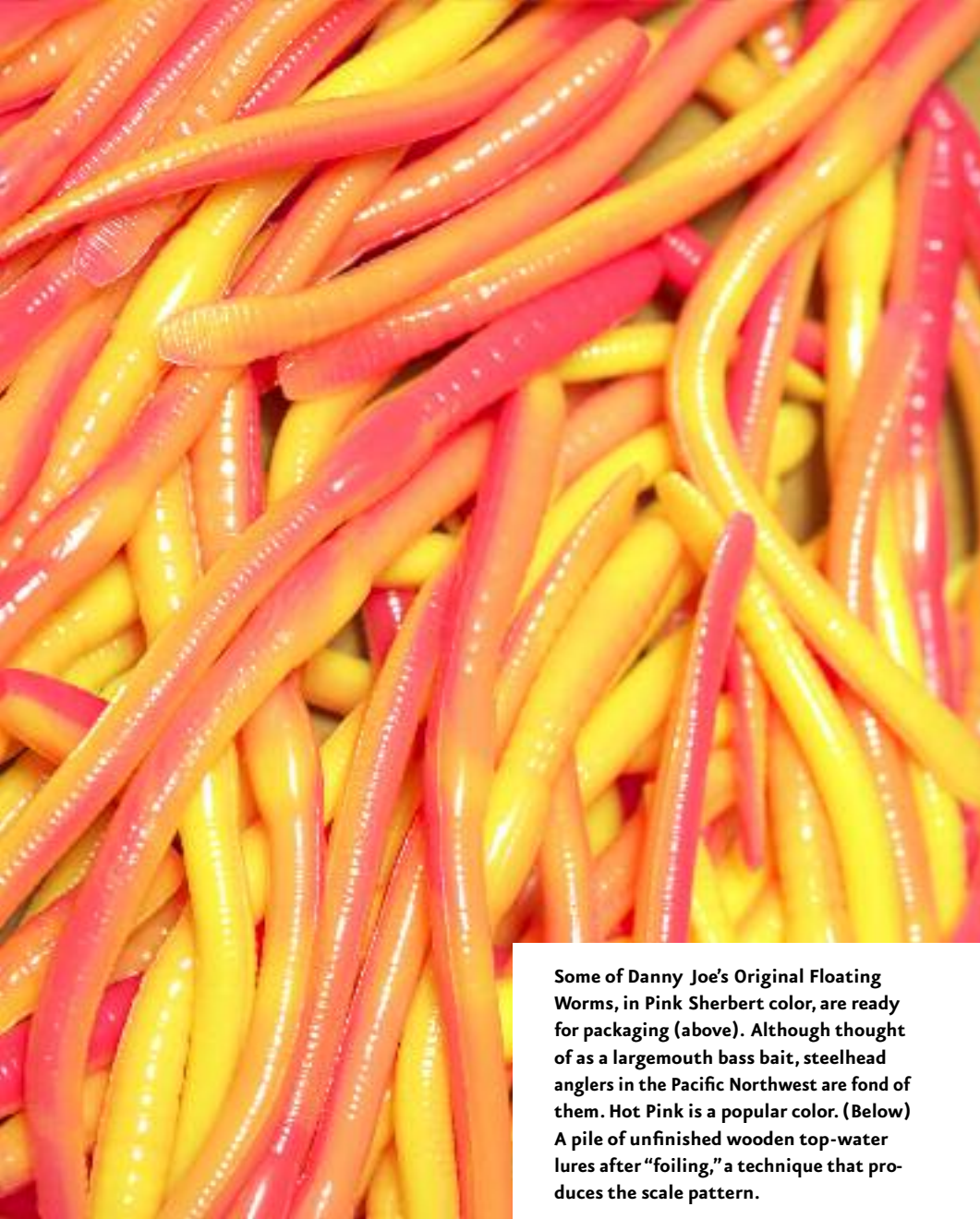
STEP 2: The cut lure form is rough sanded using a high speed rotary sander with a course 40-60 grit sanding drum. The lure continues to be shaped by hand using fine 360 grit sandpaper.

STEP 3: The lure receives the first coat of water sealing protection and hang dries for several hours. The lure is sanded using ultra-fine 600 grit sandpaper. The lure is dipped in water sealing protection again and allowed to cure overnight.

STEP 4: The lure is dipped in a high performance industrial primer barrier coat. It is allowed to cure for a minimum of 6 hours.

STEP 5: Once the primer barrier has cured, the lure is now ready for paint. The lure details and color are hand airbrushed onto the lure. The paint is allowed to cure for 24 hours.

STEP 6: (not pictured) The lure receives 2 layers of clearcoat for final lure and paint protection. The lure now receives the diving lip, hooks, and final retail packaging.



Some of Danny Joe's Original Floating Worms, in Pink Sherbert color, are ready for packaging (above). Although thought of as a largemouth bass bait, steelhead anglers in the Pacific Northwest are fond of them. Hot Pink is a popular color. (Below) A pile of unfinished wooden top-water lures after "foiling," a technique that produces the scale pattern.



newspaper articles on the walls. A bass tournament jersey—sponsor Pedigree dog food—is framed on one wall. Another display case has various lures, each with a story. His father, Marshall, made a knife with a plug handle. One plug had caught 114 bass during its career. A huge plug is signed by bass celebrities. The last lure he won a tournament with is displayed. One he made for his wife. A lure he painted for an Italian lure company and does lure designs for. Antique lures on tiny elevated stands are also scattered around the shop.

"That first year, in '97, I think I made \$800," he says. Now he's sitting at a table putting glue and sealer on feathered treble hooks bound for Boing Lures in Indiana. "Last December I sold 24,000 Zero Gravity Jigs. Just the jigs. It's like a hobby run amok. Plastics . . . we've probably sold three-quarters of a million pieces of plastic baits in the last five years. At its busiest we'll have five or six people up here bagging. Jeffery's been up here many times. I've hired nephews, my kids, my dad. I used to pay my children in chocolate, but they demand cash now. Before we lost our account with Dick's—they had a change of policy—we had an order for 20,000 worms and had to have them out in three or four days. Have you ever touched 20,000 anything by yourself? It's not much fun. I do have help when it's busiest, but I've also learned to better manage my time and what folks want at certain times of the year."

The Zero Gravity Jig has been a game changer for Barefoot. He was fishing a tournament at Shearon Harris Lake in 2007, mostly using a Carolina rig and crankbait. The fish were scattered after a hard rain and he couldn't get a fish to bite on the bottom.

"I thought to myself, 'I wish I had a jig that would float above the grass,'" Barefoot says as he works on the feathered treble hooks. "That's when the light bulb went off. I came home and didn't sleep that night. Most of my ideas come at night. That's why I keep note pads beside my bed."

After more than two years of experimenting, he finally got the design right. Jig fishermen, Barefoot says, are traditionalists who aren't open to new things.

"So I had to go with something that looked traditional, but didn't act traditional," Barefoot says. "I remember the first time I ever told Jeffery, he said 'why would you want to do something like that?' He said 'I don't get it.' I said 'what's not to get, it's a slow falling jig.' I finally made a couple and sent them to him and he took them to his pond behind his house and called me back and said 'I get it. It's amazing through stumps and weeds and pads and stuff.'"

It took Barefoot several moldings to get the jig to work correctly, and it has a fall rate of 1 foot every three seconds, where a traditional lead jig would fall 3 feet every second. The jig really took off after winning some industry awards and getting some press, so now a company in South Carolina makes the jig heads and Barefoot finishes them with skirts in his shop and ships them out. The jig is his biggest revenue producer, followed by his floating worm, "Danny Joe's Original Floater," an iconic North Carolina product line he purchased from Danny Joe Humphrey of Kinston in 2011 using a federal stimulus loan. The Ikon crankbait is third.

The ability to be creative and still work in the angling world is his greatest satisfaction. "It's nice to make stuff that people will enjoy," says Barefoot as he pulls up pictures of steelhead on his CLU Facebook page. "Folks send me pictures from across the country. That will put a little extra pep in your step when someone sends you a picture of a 3-foot salmon they caught on one of the floating worms. Hot pink is the color for steelhead. They drift them in streams. Last week one

client, Chris, ordered 500. Another fellow—and they all think this is a secret or something—is three miles away. I checked it on Google Earth, ordered 1,000. They sent me pictures of their monster steelhead. That kind of thing is very rewarding. Who'd have thought you could catch steelhead on floating worms?"

"Money doesn't satisfy me. It's nice to make a living. You can make lures all you want but it's not making a living. You can make lures one by one. I'm all over the place. I've kind of been limited with the name Custom Lures Unlimited. I'm not just custom anymore. Ten years ago it was cool to be custom. But I've branched out a lot more now to other products."

Barefoot is content to be—mostly—a one-man gang, a "little fish swimming in a big pond" is how he puts it, and he's been swimming for over a decade now. In addition to his lines he does design work for Molix in Italy, Xcite Baits in Texas, BullShad Swimbaits in Georgia and Boing Lures. Where does he want to go?



Bluegill Zero Gravity Jig

"To build a log cabin in the mountains next to a stream," he says with a laugh, still hooked on fly-fishing for trout. "You know, I've been asked that multiple times, do you want to expand or whatever. There's a little building between I-40 and Hwy. 42, a little cabin and the land that are for sale. It's got a little wood porch. I would love to have a store somewhere in the area, a place where folks could come in and sit by the stove and have their biscuit and morning drink and we could sell tackle. Something that reeks of 1950 or 1960. Something from a little bit simpler times, but with Wi-Fi, definitely some Wi-Fi, and some Blue Tooth going on in the area. And a big flat screen TV."

He laughs after he says it because he knows some may call that idea a contradiction. He'd probably call it a combination, a little bit of old school and a little bit of high tech, just like his jig, and just like his company. ♡

Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He may be reached at mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org or 919-707-0175.