When Royce Dam started tying flies in 1947 or '48, there weren't a lot of tyers around his home in Wisconsin. Royce himself had only begun fly fishing three years earlier, and strictly in warm water.

His decision to start tying was purely pragmatic: a streamer he paid 25 cents for fell apart after his second cast. "I thought, god, 25 cents for a fly and I make two casts and it's gone, dead," Royce recalls. "That's when I decided to get into tying."

What a difference 45 or so years can make. Royce Dam, who went on to teach himself fly tying with only books as his guide, became the FFF's 1994 Buz Buszek Memorial Fly Tying Award winner, one of the most prestigious fly tying awards in the world. Dam was named recipient of the Buszek Award at the 1994 FFF International Fly Show and Conclave held in Kalispell, Montana.

Not only does Dam join the company of the world's top fly tyers who have received the Buszek award over the years, but his contemporaries praise his tying skills without reserve. Buck Goodrich, who won the 1991 Western Rocky Mountain Council Fly Tyer of the Year award, said flatly, "I believe Royce is the best all-round fly tyer in the world today - I have found myself literally awed by his talents. I have had tying sessions with him where he would show me a better way to tie any fly I chose." Gary Borger, with whom Dam taught fly fishing and casting for 18 years, praised him as "an inventive and ingenious tyer whose impossibly big fingers are exceedingly skillful at dressing any fly, from tiny midges to large, full-dress salmon patterns."

In an endeavor which requires so much precision as fly tying, Dam's big hands are an anomaly which often draw comment. He comes by them honestly, from a life of hard work. The son of a machinist in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Dam joined the marines during World War II and was part of the third wave to land at Iwo Jima. When he returned home after the war he found work in factories around his home town.

Away from his work, fly fishing and fly tying were his passions and by 1953 he was selling flies to area tackle shops.

His skill and renown as a tyer grew with the sport, and Dam became in demand as a demonstration tyer at fly shows. He attended his first FFF Conclave in 1983 as a tyer, and has demonstrated his techniques at all but one since. He's also tied at other shows in a dozen states, made two trips to tie in Holland, and donated many flies and framed plates to shows and causes over the years.

Beyond his accomplishments as a tyer, Royce has had his hand in the creation of several fly fishing and tying groups in Wisconsin, and has been a ceaseless supporter of the sport. "Royce has quietly contributed far more than is commonly known to the growth and success of the Federation i Wisconsin," said L.C. "Bob Burnham, who nominated Royce for the Buszek award.

Frequently serving as a tying instructor for clubs and private classes, in 1989 Dam went overseas to teach fly tying in a newly launched tying factories in China and Bhutan. He has produced several videos in which he demonstrates his tying techniques.

One such technique is a new method for dubbing in which Royce uses combs to card the dubbing material - and eliminate the need to wax on the thread. Another is a technique for hackling from the front to the back to front again. With a third technique he demonstrates how to create a muddler head without trimming.

The techniques Royce has innovated exemplify his philosophy of "no-nonsense tying," as he describes it. He believes that tying does not have to be "a rich man's sport" and tyers really need only simple tools. In fact, in his video he uses only four.

"You don't need all this fancy stuff," he said. "You can use your hands - that's what God gave
them to you for. The main thing is to buy a good vise." He personally likes Regal rotary vises.

In tying his first goal is quality: "I'll tear a fly apart if it's not exactly right," he said. He advises purchasing good quality materials and does not use many synthetics himself. "I try to keep to the hair or the fur," he said. "I think that's fly tying."

"My thing is that wool is the cheapest you can buy," he added. "It's the easiest to work with." he even ties his dry fly patterns with wool; while wool absorbs water quickly, Royce also pointed out that it also absorbs floatant.

Royce is known for many patterns he has designed over the years, including his Dam's Hopper, the Caribou Mouse and the Arctic Shrews - all of which use his technique of flaring deer hair without having to trim afterwards. In 1991 he began tying beautiful Atlantic salmon and spey patterns that have attracted high praise. One such pattern, Winter Night, he originally tied for a friend before others began to ask for it. Another, Stars and Stripes, is dressed to resemble the American flag.

Royce is retired which means he is busier than ever with tying. He is designing more Atlantic salmon and spey patterns, plus tying orders for some of his clients. Besides the videos he will publish a book in the fall of 1998. In between all of that, he'll continue to demonstrate his tying techniques at various fly shows.

And of course, he'll also go fishing. As a master tyer who emphasizes practical flies, he knows the sternest critics his flies must please are the fish themselves. "It's a good feeling to catch a fish on your own fly, your design," says Royce Dam, the FFF's 1994 Buz Buszek Award winner.