

Tommy Harris

Spinner Blade Manufacturer Takes a ‘Different Approach’

Tom Harris has earned a reputation as one of the best walleye harness blade manufacturers in the country. This Racine native, who now resides in Pleasant Prairie and prefers to be called Tommy, is a custom painter who competes in a crowded marketplace against large fishing lure manufacturers.

I learned of Harris’ work while fishing with guide Dave Duwe, who was surprised that someone as lauded and well known as Harris would not have come to my attention sooner. I guess that with over 100,000 people in the area, there are still a few people this writer has not met. That changed this last week, when I got the chance to meet Harris and talk about his custom blades.



Harris’ affinity for custom painting was on display as youngster when he painted model cars as a hobby. His work was so good it earned him awards at model car shows.

“I was shooting (painting) metal flake on model cars back in the 7th grade,” said Harris.

Tommy Harris standing next to a selection of his spinner blades

In the late 1970’s, Harris started molding and painting floating fishing jigs. While people could buy plain colors such as yellow or green from stores, he wanted to do something different with his jigs.

“Back then it was limited what (colors) you could buy in the stores, but I was doing tricked out colors,” he said.

About 20 years ago, he started painting the blades that are used by walleye fisherman for their crawler harnesses used for trolling. There were very few blade producers who were doing detailed work and Harris saw it as untapped market.

Harris began to reap the benefits especially as walleye tournament pros began to use his blades and word of his work spread throughout the dedicated walleye angler ranks. According to Harris, many pros use his blades and buy directly from him, but they prefer to keep the information quiet in order to try and have an advantage in the highly competitive tournament world.

The blades start life in Canada where they are cut from metal sheets by a stamping company that Harris owns. The blades get shipped to another company to be either powder coated or plated depending on what he wants the final product to look like. Powder coating gives the blade a transparent finish while plating provides a reflective coating. The blades are then shipped to Harris so he can perform his custom work on the product.



A small selection of Harris' spinner blades, some featuring his unique spider web design

Harris takes a piece of long cardboard and lines it with automotive tape that he attaches to the cardboard adhesive side out. He affixes the blades to the tape which holds them tightly enough to keep them in place, but not too tightly to damage an applied paint or finish. He then paints the blades with an airbrush and applies graphic tape which is similar to a decal. Harris finishes the product by applying a hard clear coat finish.

Most of his products are sold at outdoor shows and through “mom and pop” stores. He also performs paint and graphic work for companies such as Eyelimator that make spoons and harnesses for salmon and walleye fisherman.

“If you want basic stuff, go to the big box stores,” he said.

Harris finds inspiration for his work not in the outdoor industry, but in the custom automotive and motorcycle world. Every year he attends a huge specialty auto show out in Las Vegas to view the latest paint products that he can use for his own work. Harris also takes tours of custom paint shops to get ideas for his blades.

Harris' spider web graphics and paint designs would seem to fit more on motorcycles being built by Orange County Choppers than on something made to catch fish. However, judging by the popularity, his holographic and flashy designs seem to be catching people and fish just fine.

“This business is like the jewelry business, the more bling the better,” Harris said laughing.

Harris is constantly looking for ways to improve the product and produce designs that will meet the needs of his customers and keep him at the front of the industry.

“It’s better to be a leader than a follower in this business. I am always looking for ways to improve” he said.

A casual browse through some walleye website forums shows that Harris is considered by many to indeed be the leader in walleye blades. One user on a popular forum said that Harris is, “At the top of the food chain when it comes to blades. And, I don’t see anyone in the business getting even close to overtaking him.”

In the end, Harris says it’s the high quality of his work and the different approach he takes to his designs that sets him apart from his competitors.

“I have always been different. I am not normal,” said Harris with a big smile.

Those interested in Tommy Harris’ work can contact him at 262-697-0018. His email address is tharris78@wi.rr.com.

Harris’ blades can be purchased at various locations including Tews Two in Oshkosh, WI and their website at www.tewstwo.com. Franks Great Outdoors also sells Harris’ blades and can be purchased via their website at www.franksgreatoutdoors.com.

Terry Bitz