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Origins of the Closed-Face Spinning Reel

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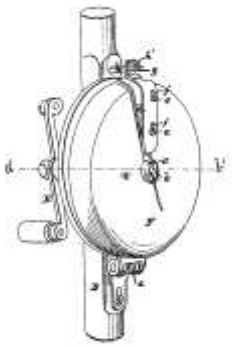
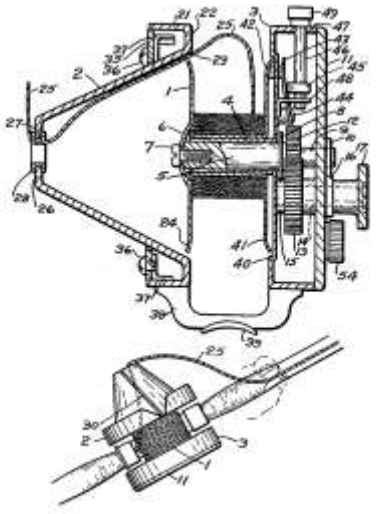
Closed-face spinning reels, or spincast reels, have become so popular during the last half-century that they probably can be found in virtually every home that houses a fisherman. The reels sold today are equipped with an array of features, not all of which were usually available on any one reel during the 1950s. The cover over the face of the reel functions as a line guide and controls the line as it spills from the stationary spool. Most modern reels are cast with the help of a rear-mounted button (the basis of an alternate term, "push-button reel," for most closed-face reels), which both releases the clutch and snubs the line as the rod is raised to casting position. Cranking reengages the clutch, and an adjustable drag, usually a star drag, is provided in case the cast is successful.



The Winans and Whistler reel, patented in 1875, is a closed-face spinning reel.

If we exclude reels that were housed completely within rods, the first closed-face reel was the Winans and Whistler reel of 1875, probably the first spinning reel ever patented. A guide in the center of the cover of the side-mounted reel controlled the line during the cast. The reel was remarkably similar to many of the side-mounted, closed-face reels popularized during the 1950s, particularly the "Magic Reel," essentially a modernized version of the 1875 reel.

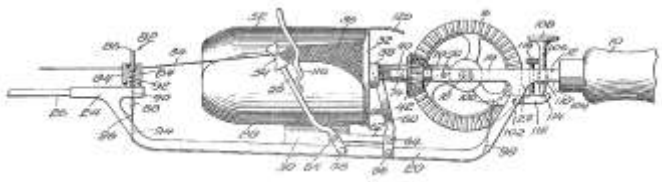
Over the next six decades, inventors devoted a lot of energy to developing spinning reels, improving upon the Malloch and Illingworth machines, devising many different ways to swivel spools, designing better bails to pick up line for retrieval, adding improved drags. But the idea of covering the front of a stationary spool seems to have languished until John M. Miller, of Bloomfield, New Jersey, reinvented the wheel and patented a side-mounted, closed-face spinning reel in 1936. Miller's purpose



Miller's side-mounted spinning reel has a conical cover. The line is slid up the slot (30) for retrieving.

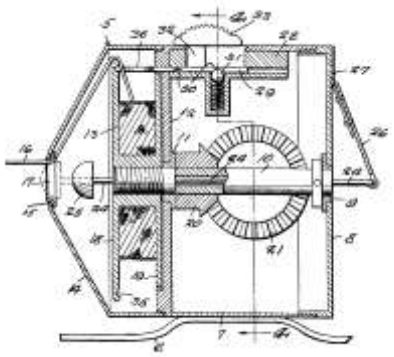
was to make a spinning reel whose spool did not have to be pivoted 90° to wind in the line and whose conical cover kept the line from billowing out and spilling off the spool. Miller's brake and click were both adjustable. Although it was easy enough to cast from the reel—a multiplier—there was no line pickup device; the fisherman had to pull the line out through a longitudinal slot in the cover so that it could be rewound conventionally.

Three years later, Vincent J. Kolosso, of Appleton, Wisconsin, patented a bizarre "egg-beater" reel that also required the angler to pull the line out of a slot in his reel's cover before he could wind it up.



Kolosso's graceful closed-face reel

What may have been the first push-button, closed-face reel was described in a patent application submitted on November 3, 1947, by Robert W. Rix, of Denver, Colorado. The button on the back of the Rix reel snubbed the line against the inside of the



The Rix spincast reel snubs the line against the inside of the line guide (17) when the thumb button (26) is pressed.

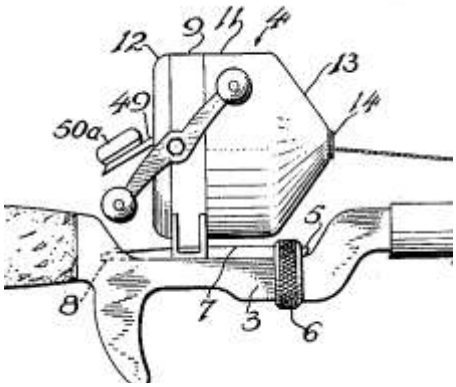
cover's line guide with a small plastic button. The feature freed the fisherman's fingers from their onerous chore of holding the line as he raised the rod for a cast. A button on top of the reel slid a pickup finger forward to grab the line for retrieval. The patent eventually was granted in 1950.

Rix, born in 1914, was a contractor in Denver after World War II. He and his wife, Helene, retired in Arvada, Colorado, where he died in 2005.

The legendary R. Dell Hull has been credited with the invention of the closed-face spinning reel by legions of writers, who usually cite his presentation of his original "beer can" reel to Tulsa's Zero Hour Bomb Co. in support of that credit.[1,2] The first Zebco reel certainly provided the company with a chance to "revolutionize" baitcasting, but collectors should remember that the reel operated quite differently from Rix's reel and from Zebco's later reels.

The back cover of this first Zebco reel has been removed to show Hull's clutch, the subject of his January, 1949, patent application. The plastic dome, or "disc," prevents spool rotation when pressed by the angler's thumb.

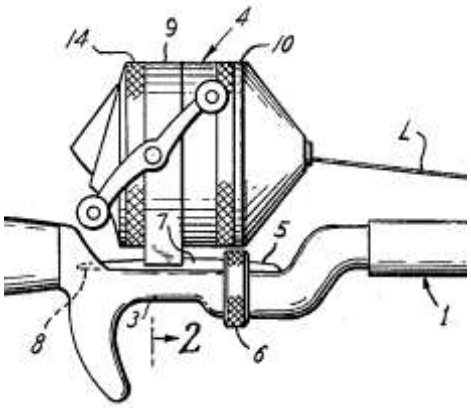
Hull submitted three applications for patents on April 6, 1948, and January 27, 1949. His earliest Zebco-related patent was eventually granted in 1951, but only after he had abandoned two of the three applications. It described the button-actuated clutch found in the first Zebco product, which separated the two crown gears during the cast. A fourth application, submitted on July 26, 1949, followed the abandonment of another earlier application. The fourth application also resulted in a patent, granted in 1954, that described the incorporation of the clutch in a closed-face reel with an internal, hemispherical "disc," which could be pressed by the angler's thumb through a hole in the back of the reel's casing.



Hull's first push-button-operated reel, shown in his January, 1952, patent application.

The spool of Hull's first Zebco reel, the "Standard," *rotated during the cast*, as well as during the retrieve, when the outgoing line engaged one of two notches in the spool flange. According to the patent, "the line passing over the head [spool] engages one of the notches and rotates the head." Thumb pressure on the disc prevents the spool from rotating, thus stopping the line flow; it does not "snub" the line. Considering that most Zebco histories attribute the inspiration of Hull's invention to his insistence that backlash is caused by rotating spools, it's somewhat surprising that *Zebco's original spincast reel did not include a truly "fixed" spool.*

Hull's first application for a push-button reel was not submitted until January 17, 1952. In this case, the button extended an internal pin to "catch" the line and prevent its release during the backcast. An even later application, submitted on October 4, 1954, described what would become a conventional-king button that, again, stopped line outflow by catching, rather than snubbing, the line during the backcast.



A more familiar button operates the reel shown in Hull's patent application of October, 1954.

There is little question that Zebco was largely responsible for much of the growth and evolution of spincasting. But it is good to be reminded now and then that the inventors of the innovations applied to reels over the years did not work in vacuums.

References

1. Corwin, Ed. The Reel Scoop on Zebco and the Zero Hour Bomb Company. *Old Reel Collectors Assoc., Inc. Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring, 1993, pg. 7

2. Winstead, Paul. Zebco—50 Years and Counting! *The Reel News*, Vol. X, No. 3, Fall, 2000, pg. 8

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