

IF YOU BUILD IT –THEY WILL COME

PART ONE

BY MICHAEL FORAN

A “fish room” could be any size or shape, contain a few tanks or house many tanks. It could be whatever you want it to be, as long as it is an area where you go to relax and enjoy the hobby. When I was a teenager, four or five tanks beneath the basement stairs made up my “fish room”. So, when I reemerged into the hobby, some twenty plus years later, I had a feeling what was going to happen. The disease of fish keeping had come back; I should have prepared my wife, Lisa, beforehand.

In the beginning...

Just before the birth of my son I convinced Lisa that an aquarium would look great in the living room, along the wall that went towards the hallway to the bedrooms. Before long a wooden cabinet with a 55 gallon aquarium stocked with Mbuna from Lake Malawi (African Cichlids) was placed in that prime location. Soon thereafter, the African Cichlids started to breed. I let the first few spawns be released within the 55 gallon, a few fry survived and were swimming amid the rocks within the tank. However, this was not good enough, an additional tank was needed to raise the fry. (*Pseudotropheus kingsizei* if memory serves me.)

After some discussion (okay, begging and pleading) a small area of the basement was cleaned up so I could set up my second tank. (Of course all *my* “stuff” had to be *thrown out* in order to accommodate this!) I chose a 20 gallon long tank on a wrought iron stand to be my new grow out tank. Things were going fine, until more African Cichlids started to breed in the 55 gallon aquarium. As luck would have it another 20 gallon long tank would fit on the wrought iron stand I purchased, beneath the upper tank. So, now I had two grow out tanks running. I’m a little foggy on the details, but shortly thereafter a 10 gallon tank on a wrought iron stand wound up in the basement too. This tank was outfitted with Badis Badis, plants and some freshwater shrimp.

One Saturday morning, a miracle occurred. Lisa came home from a walk with Dan (my son) and told me there was a garage sale on Pacific Street and that there were fish tanks on the lawn. Her next statement astounded me, “Why don’t you go and buy them.” Could I believe my ears? Did she fall and hit her head? Dan, too young to talk, was no help. Was this a trick question? I was off as fast as I could before she changed her mind. After looking over the tanks I picked up a 30 gallon tank for five dollars.

Remodeling Equals More Tanks...

The 30 gallon tank sat idle in the basement for a few weeks. Just before I started to set it up there was some talk about turning the basement into a playroom, as toys littered just

about every room of our Westwood Cape. I figured I better wait to see where these conversations went before I set up another tank in the basement. About three quarters of the basement was already finished, however, the room was very dark and gloomy and reminded me of some dismal college bars I used to frequent. (As I later found out the previous homeowner had a pool table in the basement and wanted the bar look!) As the room was not appropriate for the needs of a growing child, the basement remodel project was underway. I immediately realized the opportunity in front of me, now is my time to build a fish room!

Early in the planning stages we decided to keep the same layout of the existing basement. This eliminated the need to build new walls, saving us some money. The fish tanks were currently housed in the finished part of the basement. There was no space available in the utility room for them, so where would the tanks go? While I had some wild ideas running through my mind, I was quickly brought back down to reality when I was informed I could keep the tanks in an area just outside the utility room. This area measured approximately 12 feet long by 3 feet wide by 7 feet high. While it was not the size of the Taj Mahal, I could certainly get some tanks into this area. And, oh, by the way, I was told that if tanks wound up outside this area, both the tanks and I would be living in the street!

The Planning Stage...

Now that I had the allotted space, it was time to figure out what size tanks were going to be set-up and how to arrange them. Due to the size of the space available I decided to construct one long rack that could hold 6 – 8 tanks. Since my interest was in African Cichlids, I decided to go with 20 gallon long tanks and 30 gallon tanks. (The 20 gallon long tanks for grow out and the 30 gallon tanks for breeding.)

Being the Engineering geek that I am, the layout of the stand was plotted on scaled graph paper. After a few revisions the first version of the “fish rack”, as it would be called, was reached. The “fish rack” would be divided into three distinct sections (referred to as columns); the left column would house three rows, each row holding a 20 gallon long tank [30”×12”×12”], the center column would hold two rows, each with a 30 gallon tank [36”×12”×16”] and the right column would contain three rows, each with a 20 gallon long tank.

Around this time I became very active in the social aspects of the hobby, being the Society’s newly elected President. I was invited to visit the fish room of two Society members who also shared a love for African Cichlids. For the sake of this article we will call them “Angelo” and “Danny”. “Angelo’s” fish room was in the basement of his home, where tanks occupied a small room in addition to being neatly lined around the perimeter of his finished basement. Tanks situated around the perimeter of the room were placed on wooden (2”×4”) stands that were nicely painted. “Danny’s” fish room was also in his home’s basement. This basement was unfinished, and it was clear that “Danny’s” intent was to get as many tanks as possible into this area. After visiting these two fish rooms my plan changed. I saw tanks that “Angelo” referred to as “breeder” tanks. These tanks were

deeper than standard tanks, having a depth of 18 inches. Plus, I learned that by turning tanks sideways you can fit more tanks into a given area. Lastly, after making these visits it was evident that a large tank, over 55 gallons, was in order. So it was back to the graph paper to design the second version of my fish rack.

After much thought, and crumbled sheets of graph paper, I came up with the revised design of the fish rack. Again, three columns of tanks, but this time the left column would house 2 tanks, 40 gallon breeders [36"×18"×16"] on two levels. The center column would also house 2 tanks, a 40 gallon breeder on the top shelf and a 90 gallon tank [48"×18"×24"] on the bottom shelf. The right most column would have three rows. Each row holding two (2) 15 gallon tanks [20"×10"×12"] and a 10 gallon tank [20"×10"×12"], all placed sideways. This would total 13 tanks. Not too shabby for a beginner!

In the next part of this article we will look at the construction of the fish rack, tank setup, what lessons were learned and what is on the horizon. 'Till then...