

THE CASTING CLINIC

With Al Kyte

THE FALSE CAST AND LINE HAND



The KISS admonition, 'Keep it Simple, Stupid,' weighs heavily on any teacher's mind. As a result, we instructors introduce casting to novices by having them use only the rod hand, make a single pick-up-and-lay-down cast, and even break that up into only back casts or forward casts. There is enough to think about in controlling the movements of the casting arm, rod, and fly line. Yet, some students have watched fly fishers and are impatient to use both hands and keep the line moving back and forth in the air. So, caving in to increasing mutinous pressure, we introduce the false cast and the line hand at the first sign of casting consistency. These additional elements of the cast include concepts, some often overlooked, that may sharpen your casting and improve your fishing.

The False Cast

You are false casting whenever you cast the fly line back and forth in the air without letting it fall to the water. It is false, or at least incomplete, in that it is not allowed to drop to do 'real' fishing. When switching from pickup-and-lay-down to false casting, your initial back cast and forward cast remain the same until the leader is straightening in front. Then, instead of letting your line fall to the water, you start your next back cast. If your fly ticks the water in front, adjust your rod stops a little farther back to lower the backcast and raise the forward cast a bit.

Instructors typically mention three uses for a false cast. As a beginner, you start false casting to add a little distance. On the stream, you

soon learn a second use - shaking water from the hackles of a dry fly. The third use, changing direction, may occur to you spontaneously on a lake when, in the middle of a cast, a fish rises off to one side. Rotating your upper body helps change the direction of the next false casts to drop the fly near that rise.

Authors of books on casting sometimes overlook another important use of the false cast, however - making corrections. This includes fine-tuning the distance or direction of the cast for accuracy, as well as altering the upward or downward angle - what I call the target line of your cast. False casting also provides the opportunity to make corrections in timing, rod angle, stroke length, force, and rod bend, typically to improve the size and/or shape of your casting loops.

In fact, false casting can become so much of your practice that you begin to rely on it too much when fishing. I have seen instructors limit students to three false casts and have heard exasperated fishing guides remind clients that 'the fish are in the water, not in the sky.' The number of false casts is even more critical in bonefishing, where one too many will spook an approaching fish. Experienced Bahamian guides say 'Drop it, mon,' which means, 'Let that cast fall to the water. Don't dare make another false cast'. With such help, you soon learn to fish with as few false casts as necessary.

Ultimately, you learn to regard the false cast as part of the way to approach wary fish. Thus, you extend line well off to the side, often with a

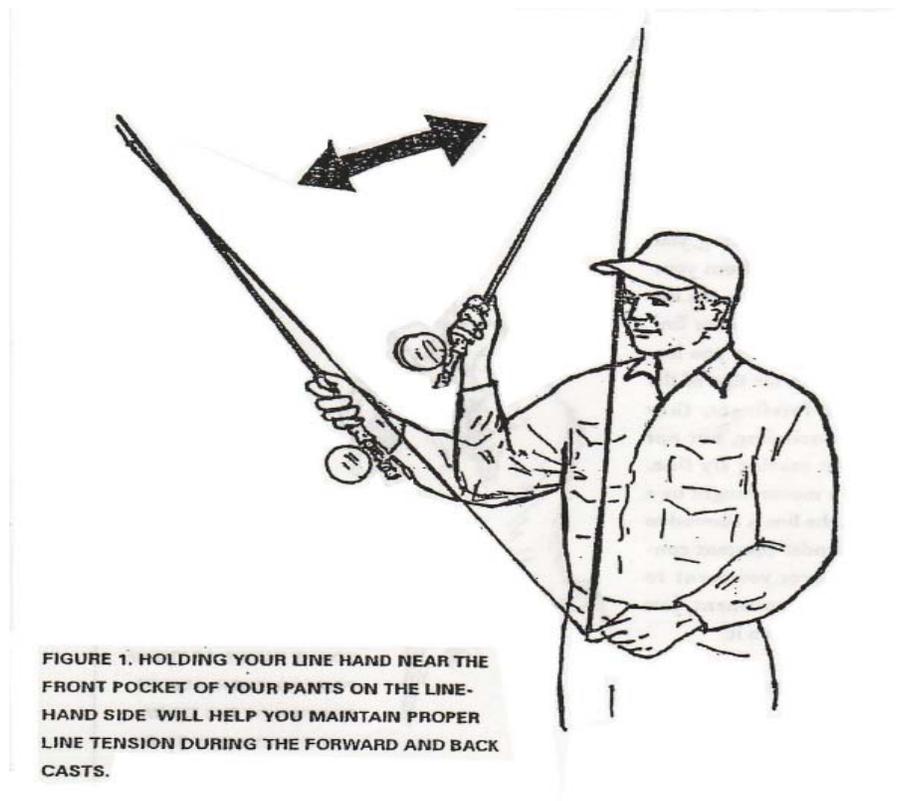


FIGURE 1. HOLDING YOUR LINE HAND NEAR THE FRONT POCKET OF YOUR PANTS ON THE LINE-HAND SIDE WILL HELP YOU MAINTAIN PROPER LINE TENSION DURING THE FORWARD AND BACK CASTS.

low, sidearm motion, or, lacking a choice of casting angles, false cast short of the fish, extending line only on the final delivery. Quick rod movements, as well as line flash, spook fish when false casting. Although you need to false cast line out quickly ahead of a moving fish, especially when bonefishing, you learn to move the rod as slowly and deliberately as time permits.

The Line Hand

When casting with the rod hand only, you control the line by trapping it against the cork grip. This prevents additional line from creeping off the reel. Yet the need to change casting distance calls for a better way to control the release of that line. Placing the line in your non-dominant hand gives you a way to do that. Although you eventually use this line hand to shoot, retrieve, and haul line, you first train it to hold the line so as to prevent slack. We usually think of avoiding slack beyond the rod tip, but here, we are concerned with the slack that forms between

your line hand and the stripping guide, the first guide up from the reel. This slack will occur if your line hand and rod hand approach one another as you accelerate your cast. Such slack can work up the rod and affect its bending (loading) and straightening (unloading), thus interfering with the efficient transfer of energy to the fly line.

Authors of casting books typically suggest avoiding this slack by moving the line hand in concert with the rod hand - up and back on the back cast and down and forward on the forward cast, keeping the two hands a constant distance apart. Otherwise, slack may form during the forward cast as the rod hand approaches a stationary line hand.

Yet moving the line hand often gives students too much to think about. Some students begin to lose what they have learned with the rod hand. Others move the line hand farther than the rod hand without realizing it, thus letting the line hand approach the stripping guide during the back cast. This creates the slack in the back

cast that you are trying to prevent in the forward cast.

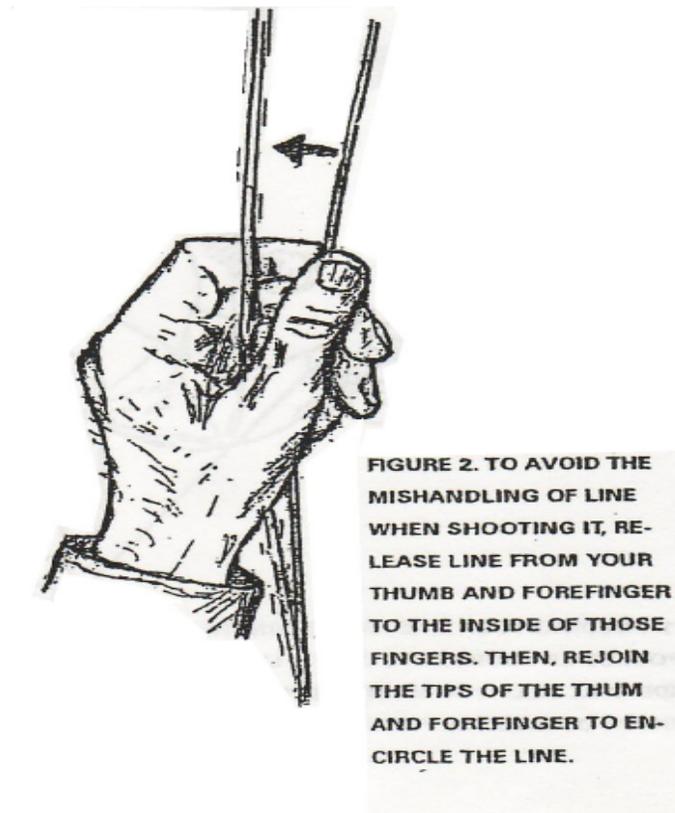
A stationary line hand has worked best for me, but held off to the side away from the casting arm, rather than in front, where the hands would come together, so I teach holding the line close to your front pants pocket on the line-hand side. This position keeps the line hand approximately the same distance from the stripping guide throughout the casting stroke that I teach, thus maintaining line tension (Figure 1). When you learn the double haul, your well-timed pulls with the line hand will further increase your control of this line.

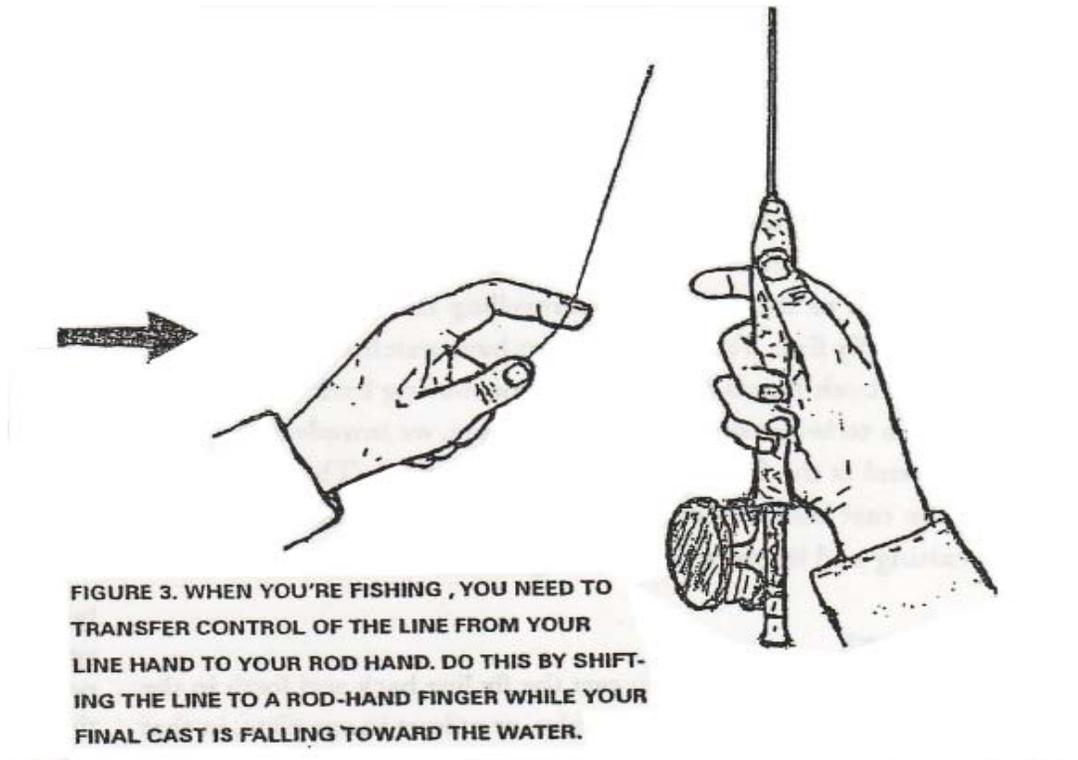
Adding distance to your cast requires learning when and how to release the line, as well. So far, you have been holding it between your thumb and forefinger throughout the cast. I encourage students to release the line when they have stopped the forward cast and can see their casting loop in the air. This release of line into the cast is generally called 'shooting line'. Eventually, there may be times you will want to shoot

line on the back cast, too. Fly line is made available to shoot by initially pulling or 'stripping' it off the reel, letting it fall to the ground. This slack line is not a problem, because your line hand prevents it from moving up the rod until needed. After shooting line, you may occasionally have trouble grabbing it again in time to start fishing effectively. To avoid such mishandling, you learn to release line from your thumb and forefinger to the inside, or palm side, of those fingers (Figure 2). When you immediately rejoin the tips of the thumb and forefinger, they should be encircling, but not holding the moving fly line. Much like a mouse caught by a playful cat, the line is allowed to move, but under constant control. Whenever you want to stop the line's movement, just close your fingers on it.

A Practice Sequence

I add these new dimensions to the cast in three stages. Introduce the false cast first, but continue to limit its practice to the rod hand only. This permits you to concentrate on one new





thing, starting the back cast while the leader is straightening in the air. Next, I add the line hand, emphasizing the hand position I have described. In this part of your false-cast practice, you focus on feeling constant line tension up to the stripping guide throughout the cast. If you notice your line hand moving a little during the cast to maintain line tension, that's fine. You are focusing on the most important thing. Finally, I add the release of more line and combine these elements into what I call an 'upstream fishing presentation'. If you haven't done this before, you are casting different amounts of fly line in the same series of casts and learning that your timing changes with distance. You also are learning to transfer the control of the line from the line hand, when casting, to the rod hand, when stripping line back in. Thus, I teach casting with your hands apart and fishing with your hands together. In this practice, I also teach fishing with the rod tip low and have students set the hook on command by separating the line and rod hands enough to move the fly a few inches. Start with enough line off the reel to make a cast

of 40 to 50 feet. Retrieve line until you can start false casting with only 20 feet or so of line beyond the rod tip. As you do this, release a little line into each forward cast before pinching it again. If the line doesn't shoot easily through the rod, you are probably releasing it too early, before enough weight is out in front to pull more line forward. Check this by making sure you are seeing your forward casting loop before releasing the line. As the final cast is straightening and falling to the grass or water, bring the line hand directly across to the rod, hooking the line on the partially open index finger (or second finger if you prefer) of your rod hand (Figure 3). Then, strip the line back in on the water or grass with the line hand behind that control point, as if keeping pace with a current bringing the fly down stream toward you. When you have stripped in all but 20 feet of fly line, separate the hands again and start the next cycle of false casting. When you feel comfortable with this practice, you have learned enough to start fishing. Before you go, however, don't forget to read up on wading safety and angler etiquette.