

# The Basics -

## by Bruce W. Richards

*Fly casting has a reputation as being difficult. It isn't. The techniques that result in good fly casting are no more difficult to master than those of spin or bait casting...well, maybe just a little. To make learning to fly cast as easy as possible there are a few basic things you need to know.*

### **Gearing Up**

It's not necessary to spend a lot of money on equipment to learn to fly cast. There are complete fly fishing outfits that cost \$100 to \$200 that work very well. Choose one designed for 5-, 6-, or 7-weight lines as they are easier to cast than heavier or lighter rigs. Buying a well-known brand from a reputable dealer will usually insure an outfit that will work well. Spending more money on your first fly-fishing gear won't necessarily make learning to cast easier.

You may be tempted to save wear and tear on your leader by not using one during casting practice. This is a false economy. Not only is it very difficult to cast effectively without a leader, you will likely damage your fly line. Lines are made to cast with leaders and don't cast well without them. Use a leader for your practice sessions, but when you fish replace it with a new one.

### **Practice**

Once you have some gear, it's time to practice. Practicing in your yard or in a local park is often better than going to the fishing hole. There are fewer distractions when 'grass casting', and if your line should happen to hit the ground it doesn't hang up like it does when it hits water. You will, however, have to put up with the neighbors asking how the fishing is. When you practice, make sure you cast at targets – without a target you can't tell if you're casting accurately.

### **Grab Hold**

There are a lot of ways to grip a fly rod, and all of them work, but not for all casts. The grip I am going to suggest starting with is tried and true, works for all casts, and is used by many of the very best casters. Should you decide to experiment with some of the other grips later, feel free - you might find one you like better than this one.

Sometimes called the "suitcase" grip, this grip requires putting four fingers under the grip, your thumb directly on top (Fig. 1). This is a strong grip that allows good control and can minimize fatigue as it spreads the force across all five fingers. By keeping the thumb (your strongest finger) directly on top, power can be applied on the forward cast and the rod stopped on the back cast.

### **Assume the Position**

A proper stance can be helpful while practicing. I am a proponent of watching your back cast, and how you stand can allow that without getting a stiff neck. Stand with your feet pointing about 45 degrees off the target (to the right for right hander; to the left for a southpaw). This allows you to turn your head to the right and easily watch the line when it is behind you (Fig. 2). The back cast sets up the front cast, so if it's not very good, don't expect much out front.

### **It's All in the Loops**

Thirty feet of fly line is a good length to start with - less line is hard to feel as it doesn't load the rod well; more line requires better technique. Start with the line straight on the ground in front of you.

A key factor in good fly casting is making the rod tip travel in a straight line throughout the casting stroke. If the path of the rod tip through the cast is fairly straight, you get a "tight" loop that has little wind resistance and casts farther and more accurately than a "wide" loop. Figures 3 and 4 show a couple of common tip paths and the loops they make.

For beginners, the most common mistake that results in big, wide loops is bending the wrist too much during the casting stroke. When the wrist bends too much the rod tip travels in a big wide, upward arc which makes big loops. Big loops can't be thrown very far and are very difficult to throw accurately.

To make nice, tight loops you need to bend the rod progressively more through the stroke to keep the rod tip going straight. This means that you need to *accelerate the rod smoothly* through the casting arc. Most beginning casters apply too much power too soon in the stroke. If you force yourself to *start slow and finish fast* you will get better loops

Watch your loops: if they are too big, start to apply power a little later, and stop a little earlier. It's sometimes difficult to see your own loops because you're standing right under them, but practicing with a partner who can help analyze your cast can be very helpful.

Finally, the rod tip must stop very abruptly at the end of the casting stroke in order to make a good loop.

Fly casting is not difficult. Use balanced gear, grip the rod right, stand so you can see your cast, cast at targets and shorten your stroke if your loops are too big. These tips will help you get started effectively. Watch this column for more helpful tips in the future.