

THE CASTING CLINIC

With Al Kyte

THE FORWARD CAST



The overhead cast is two casts in one - a back cast and a forward cast. The back cast, though demanding of your attention and practice time, is essentially a preparatory movement, a way to straighten the line behind your cast to the fish. One of the most satisfying things about casting forward is watching your best loops progress out from the rod tip. Unfortunately, visual feedback does not guarantee well-shaped casting loops. The forward cast has its own pitfalls, and these have frustrated many fly fishers. This discussion may provide the missing piece in your own search for an improved forward cast.

Start Smoothly

Flycasting instructors agree that your pause at the end of the back cast should last until your line has *almost* straightened. If your forward cast is accompanied by a whip-cracking sound, you started while the line was still moving rapidly backward - too early. If you feel a tug, your line has straightened and is starting to drop - you've waited too long. If you wait this long when using a weighted fly, it will swing up and down while being pulled forward and may hook you. Despite your best efforts, the fly line will not always straighten behind you, especially if there is wind. So your initial forward movement may have to help pull the line straight, as well as start it forward. Any unevenness in the rod's initial pull on this line, which can result from punching or shocking the rod, will cause the line to deviate from its straight path. Instructors use words

such as 'gradually' and 'smoothly' when teaching this initial movement forward. Sometimes I think of trying to 'pull the tip around', a Mel Krieger phrase that reminds me to move the rod tip steadily.

Every expert distance caster I have analyzed has used some type of shoulder movement to provide this smooth start forward. I try to develop that habit in beginning students, as well. I introduce them to one style of shoulder movement, yet realize that other styles can also be effective. Attempting to use the wrist to start forward is responsible for most of the tailing loop problems I see. The wrist is better suited for quick, final movements than for those requiring sustained, evenly applied force. Lifting your hand to ear level during the back cast helps position your arm for forward shoulder movement.

The shoulder movement I introduce to students lowers their elbow - just three or four inches downward on a cast of 30 to 40 feet. As this occurs, the elbow remains bent and the wrist firm (Figure 1). Lowering the arm in this way starts tipping the rod forward, which moves the line without jerking it. You may already be familiar with this shoulder movement from the emphasis placed on it by instructors such as Joan Wulff, Gary Borger, and Jan Kurahara.

Stop Abruptly

Although instructors typically teach starting smoothly, most emphasize stopping abruptly. As

in the back cast, an abrupt stop of your accelerating fly rod completes an efficient transfer of energy from you to the rod, which then straightens to release energy to the fly line. Instructors differ in how they teach this stop. Some have their students keep the wrist 'firm' throughout the forward cast to prevent problems that result from a loose, floppy wrist. The persistent 'wristiness' of some students has tempted me to suggest using a 'locked' wrist, but I avoid doing so because skilled casters typically use some wrist action. Yet if we instruct students to add a little wrist action, they are likely to overdo it. Knowing this, Lefty Kreh has advised students to 'press the thumb' in order to achieve wrist action without students consciously thinking about the wrist. Even when advising the use of a firm wrist, we are hoping students will include a little wrist movements, and often they do.

Other instructors believe this wrist action is so important that they emphasize it in their teaching. Lefty and Joan Wulff cast with different styles, yet both have stated that they use large muscles to provide force and direction to throw the line, but a late, quick wrist movement to control the size of the casting loop. For years, Jimmy Green has insisted that stopping the rod is the key to fly casting. His 'positive stop' consists of tightening the grip while creating a little wrist action by pressing with the thumb. This wrist action is almost immediately stopped against the heel of his hand. So the 'positive' in his 'positive stop' is a little wrist pivot that not only stops the rod, but helps force the tip over the resistance of the butt of the rod. Longtime East Coast instructor Bill Cairns has similarly described this wrist action. Doug Swisher has taught it as a 'micro-wrist' movement and Joe Humphreys as a 'tap'.

In teaching the back cast, I have emphasized keeping the wrist firm to control the rod tip, thus helping me know where the fly line is going when it's behind me. Yet on the forward cast, I want to build in wrist action as part of the stop. To do this, I need to channel a student's wrist movement into a late time frame within the cast. So I use a 'drop the elbow, break the wrist' sequence that I first heard being credited to Chris Korich. By lowering the elbow first, the wrist movement is delayed and occurs closer to the stop (Figure 2). Joan Wulff recommends starting this wrist action when the butt of your rod is perpendicular to the angle at which you are trying to straighten your fly line (the 'target line').

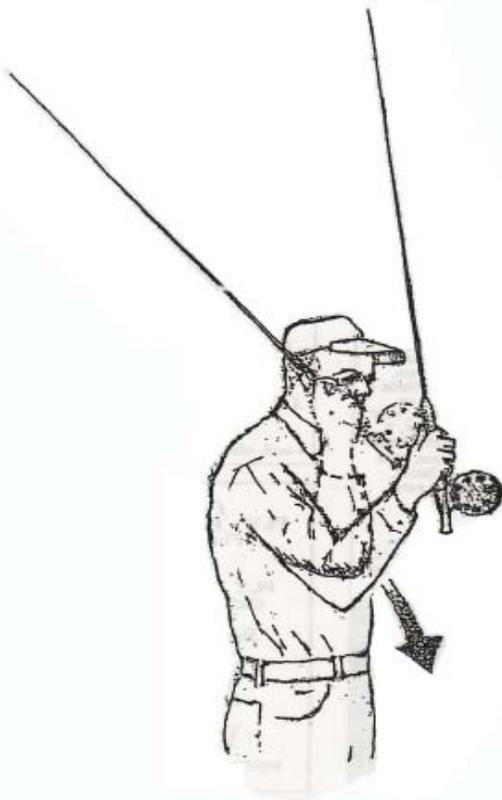


Figure 1. Use your shoulder to drop the elbow, which gives a smooth start to your forward cast. Keep the wrist firm, too: This will help prevent tailing loops and ensure the stronger muscles of the shoulder and upper arm provide power to the casting stroke.

Slow Down

The forward cast ends with this abrupt stop, with the rod tip straightening close under the moving fly line. If you drop the rod tip low during the cast, you pull the lower part of the casting loop open and lose the efficiency of a small loop. Yet after this stop, you can lower your hand and rod for fishing or starting the next back cast. Some instructors call this the 'follow down'. Another term used to differentiate a high stop from lowering the rod is 'stop and drop'.

Practice

In the previous issue of *California Fly Fisher*, I introduced a way to practice back casts on a lawn - slowly lifting the line up off the grass, accelerating and stopping your hand at ear level, letting the fly line land behind you, and then turning around to make another back cast. This first part of a 'pick-up and lay-down cast' is done

initially with the rod hand only, trapping the fly line against the cork grip, and with about 30 feet of fly line and leader beyond the rod tip.

Before adding the forward cast to this sequence, try practicing the forward casting movements, 'drop the elbow, break the wrist,' without a fly rod. As you do this, keep your elbow bent (not reaching the hand forward) and stop your hand at chest level. Then try these movements with your fly rod before stringing up the line. Include your back-cast lift to ear level, stopping the rod abruptly, then drop the elbow and break the wrist, stopping the rod about halfway between vertical and horizontal. Then let your hand and rod 'follow down'. Repeat this sequence of movements until it starts to feel natural: Back-cast lift, drop the elbow, break the wrist, and follow down.

Now string up the rod. You are ready to add the forward cast to your back-cast practice. Start as before, making your back cast and letting

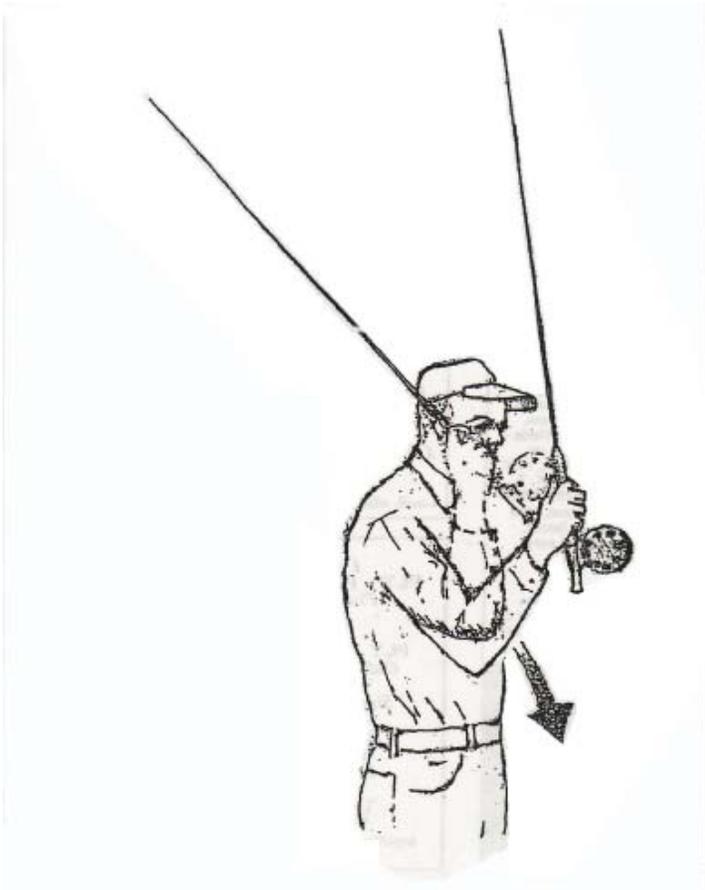


Figure 2. Although large shoulder muscles provide force and direction when throwing the line, a late, quick wrist movement is needed to control the size of the loop. By lowering the elbow first (as in Figure 1), the wrist motion occurs later in the cast.

the fly line fall to the grass behind you. Instead of turning around, take a moment to make sure your casting hand is positioned at ear level and your rod angled slightly back from vertical. Now start a forward cast by dropping the elbow slightly and quickly break your wrist to complete the cast. You are trying to get the far part of your fly line and leader to hit the grass first. If the fly line closest to you lands first, you have either lowered your elbow too far, lowered your hand and rod early, or mistimed your wrist movements. Check your stop position first.

If your hand is at chest level and your rod tip somewhat higher, you have not lowered the rod too far or too early. Then check the timing of your wrist action by watching the rod butt above your hand during the forward cast. When tilted a bit forward of vertical, it is perpendicular to a slightly downward-aimed target line. Apply wrist action at that point and stop the rod.

Include the 'follow down' in preparation for the next back cast. Continue this sequence of letting both the back cast and forward cast drop to the grass until the far part of your forward-cast line is landing first. Then start making your back cast and forward cast without dropping the fly line to the grass in between. This completes your pick-up and lay-down cast.

Breaking the cast into parts is a great way to check your technique whenever you haven't cast for awhile. Tim Rajeff uses a long-line version of this practice to help experienced casters get the most out of their rod arm to improve their distance casting. I like the shoulder-to-wrist 'throwing' sequence that develops from this teaching style and practice. Yet, if this movement pattern is difficult or unnatural for a student, I often switch to a 'firm wrist' emphasis or a different style of arm movement. Sometimes, as instructors, we fall in love with our own styles instead of adjusting our teaching to students who move and learn in different ways. I hope this instruction works for you, offering something that smoothes out your initial movement or helps develop a quick-wrist stop to tighten your loops.