

THE CASTING CLINIC

With Al Kyte

THE BACK CAST



'God must not be a fly fisher, or He would have put eyes in the back of our heads'. My student was clearly frustrated with her back cast. "I'm not so sure," I replied. "Maybe He just wants us to have faith in what we can't see." She grumbled something and returned to her casting.

Many people share this frustration with a form of angling in which the line is cast backward before being cast forward. Even some accomplished fly fishers are self-conscious about their back casts. We don't want to keep looking back when fishing, and we aren't used to applying force backward when throwing something. Most people underpower the back cast at first, while others jerk the rod back with excessive force. The most common fault though, is dropping the rod tip and line low in back by breaking the wrist.

Start Low and Slow

Most fly-casting instructors recommend starting the back cast with the rod tip pointed forward, low to the water (or grass).

This gives your fly line the straightest possible path down through the rod and onto the water. The absence of slack allows you to start moving the line and bending the rod as soon as you begin lifting it to make the back cast. Slack in the line would cause you to start and stop the back cast farther back, thus increasing the likelihood of directing the fly line downward behind you.

I have my students start lifting the rod slowly un-

til it is more than halfway to vertical. Starting slowly counteracts some people's tendency to start moving the fly rod too fast. Starting back too rapidly can bend the rod so much that the tip drops below the path of the fly line, causing a tailing loop. It also causes the 'whooshing' sound you may hear your rod makes and leaves a trail of bubbles on the water if you lift the line off too early.

Lift Clear to the Ear

Most casting instructors teach an up-and-backward hand movement to move the rod during the back cast, with enough acceleration to send the fly line up and backward, as well. (Information on target lines for straightening the fly line appeared in the July/August 2001 issue). Lifting the hand as high as the ear is a teaching guideline I use to emphasize the movement pattern I want beginners to practice (Figure 1). I use the ear level to provide enough lift to raise the elbow a few inches. The old tradition of casting with a book under the arm allowed you to lift your hand only to the level of the neck. The additional lifting that raises the elbow brings in bigger shoulder muscles and positions the arm for a strong forward casting movement that will continue to serve you well on longer casts. When students become comfortable lifting to the ear, I teach them to shorten or lengthen this movement, depending on the distance of the cast being made. Expert casters, regardless of style, use short hand movements for short casts and longer ones for longer casts.

There are some variations in back-cast styles, however. Lefty Kreh teaches a horizontal hand movement, rather than a lift - his back cast style is more sidearm than the style with which many of us begin. This sidearm style has advantages. It helps keep big hooks away from your head on windy days and keeps you from having to lift heavy, stiff saltwater rods overhead. There are a number of situations in which I use a sidearm back cast when fishing.

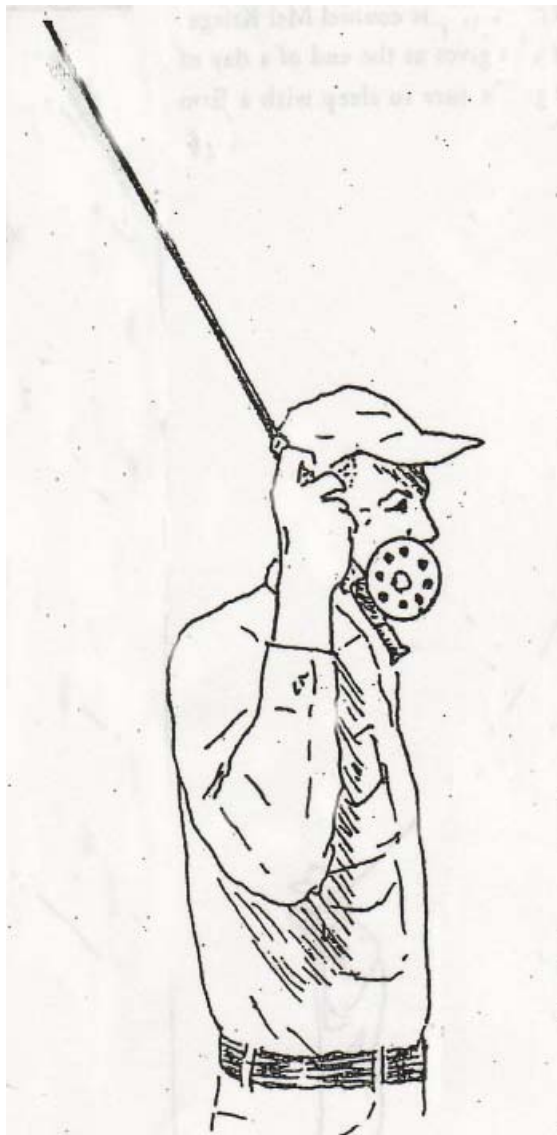


FIGURE 1. A FIRM-WRISTED LIFT TO THE EAR MINIMIZES USE OF WEAK WRIST MUSCLES, AND ADDS THE STRENGTH OF SHOULDER MUSCLES TO THE CASTING STROKE.

For me, though, the primary advantage of a more vertical back cast is you can easily align all parts of the cast - the fly rod, casting arm, fly line, and vertical loops - to improve accuracy (imagine, for example, having to drop the fly, leader, and line onto a narrow seam of slow-moving water). I like a vertical casting plane for teaching the initial movement patterns to beginning casters, as well.

Keep a Stiff Wrist

Without the initial emphasis on a lift, many people keep their casting hand low, leaving the wrist to do the work of moving the rod. Occasionally you see someone cast fairly well that way, but most of us have problems applying force smoothly to a long cast when having to rely on weak wrist muscles. Wristy casting habits, which often cause the fly line to drop downward in back, are seldom easy to break, so most teachers emphasize a firm wrist along with an upward arm movement.

How firm should the wrist be? We see some variation in wrist firmness among expert casters. Some experts teach a little 'controlled' wrist motion as a means of increasing tip speed. For example, Joan Wulff has the wrist 'crack slightly' near the end of the back cast, and Tim Rajeff uses his wrist to rotate the tip earlier in the lift. However, many of my beginning students lose consistency when taught even such limited wrist action on the back cast, so I start out teaching a very firm wrist to control the movement of the rod tip, and I leave the introduction of additional wrist action and tip speed for later. I like Steve Rajeff's back cast as a model for beginners. It is difficult to detect any wrist action in his lift until he has stopped the rod butt.

Stop the Cast Fast

As you lift your hand up to your ear, you should stop it abruptly. Whenever you put a bend into a fly rod and then stop its butt abruptly, you force the tip to speed up and reverse its bend. This speeds up the fly line, as well. Casting instructors teach an abrupt stop in various ways to capture this additional energy. Re-nowned rod designer and tournament caster Jimmy Green

coined the term 'positive stop.' I use term 'squeeze stop,' because I squeeze the fingers to help make the stop. Another phrase we often hear is 'accelerate to a stop.' The timing required to speed up the rod tip just before the stop is not always easy to grasp. Most of us are used to throwing a ball and seem to want to apply force earlier in the movement.

Coming to an abrupt stop from an upward hand movement tends to bend (unload) the rod tip backward. The more you tip your hand back horizontally in an overhead back cast, or fail to make an abrupt stop, the more the rod tip bends downward, rather than backward (Figure 2).

The difference in loop size can be impressive.

Back-Cast Practice

One good way to focus on back-cast technique is to spend some time practicing only back casts. Find a spacious lawn and lay out about thirty feet of fly line straight in front of you. Start with the rod tip within a few inches of the grass. Slowly lift the tip, watching the yarn fly at the end of your leader move on the lawn. When your rod butt is almost up to vertical, speed up your lifting movement, and almost immediately stop your hand near your ear. If you have kept your wrist firm, your rod tip will stop slightly back of

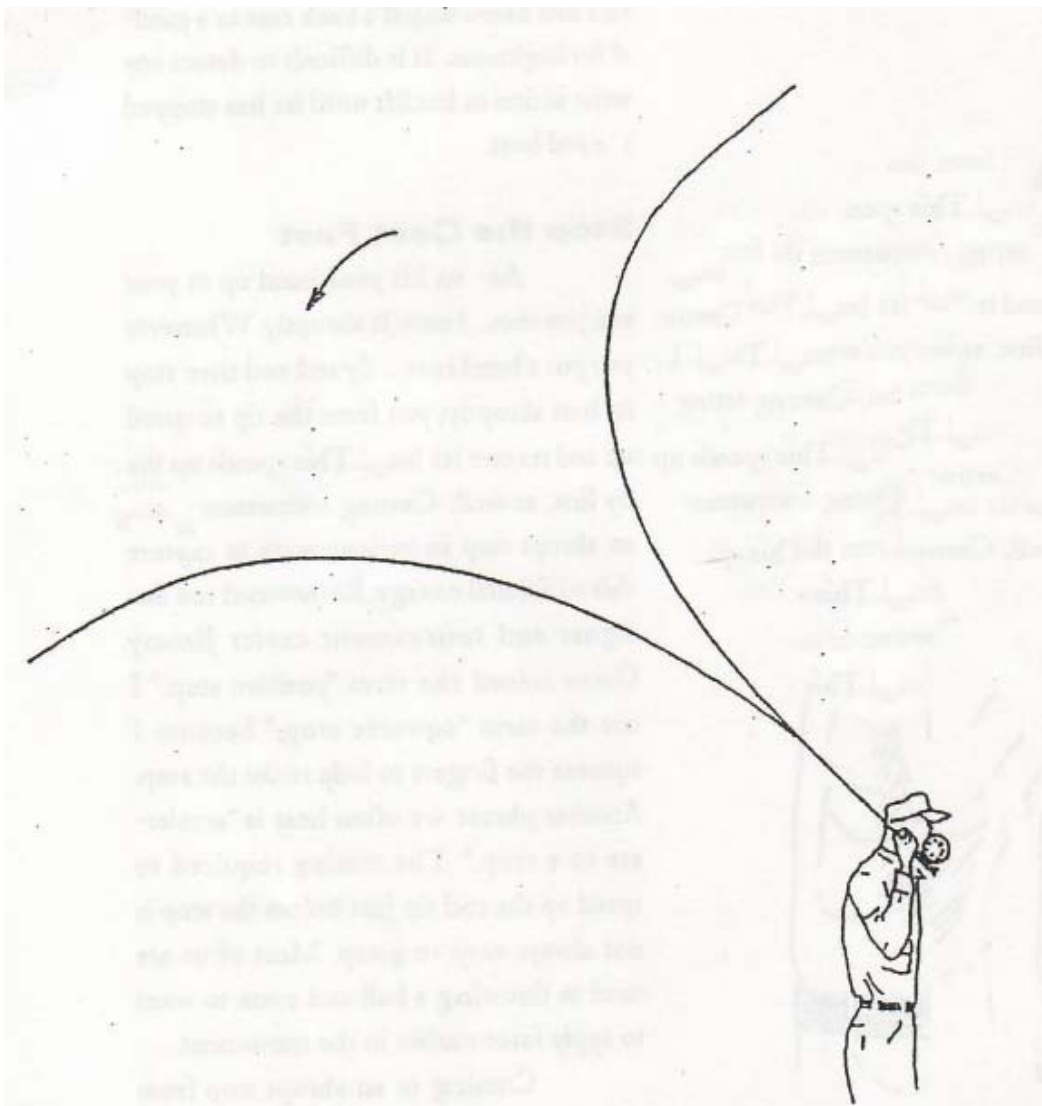


Figure 2. This illustration of an overhead cast shows a poorly-formed bend in the rod - it's too low - caused by moving the rod hand backwards horizontally prior to the stop moving the rod hand back and upward instead wouldhave reduced this problem.

vertical, sending the fly line rearward and somewhat upward. Let the line drop to the lawn behind you, then turn around and back up enough to pull the fly line straight again on the grass as you reposition your rod tip low. Make another back cast. Turn, back up, and do it again. If this practice is repeated over several sessions, you should start feeling yourself gaining control over any tendency to break your wrist on your back cast.

There are various ways to check your progress when working on your back cast. A fly-fishing friend observing from off to one side can make suggestions that help improve your timing, back-cast direction, and loop size. Gordon Judd, an innovative caster from the Long Beach Casting Club, has suggested rigging a mirror stand in front of you so you can watch your back-cast loops without having to turn to look back - a caster's rearview mirror. Opening up your stance enough to turn and watch your back casts can help, too, but usually the turning movement

alters what is happening in your back cast. When I turn back, I try to change my shoulder and arm alignment as little as possible.

You can easily check your hand movement and wrist firmness by glancing over at your rod hand during some of your back casts. As a guideline to this style, I try to stop with my forearm vertical and the rod butt offset from it about 30 degrees. As mentioned previously, you can also check for any excessive early force by listening for the sound of your fly rod. You should be able to cast without hearing your rod.

The back-cast movement I teach beginning students, with a firm-wristed lift to a stop at ear level, together with these practice ideas, often have proved helpful to people with well-ingrained back-cast problems. Don't be resigned to the limitations that may have crept into your casting. Give these ideas a try. My only additional advice is the counsel Mel Krieger sometimes gives at the end of a day of casting: "Be sure to sleep with a firm wrist."
