

The Loop

*The Federation of Fly Fishers Journal for Certified Casting Instructors
Fall 2002*

Arm Styles

By Al Kyte

Experienced fly fishers differ from one another in how they cast. They stand, hold the rod, and move their bodies in different ways, yet differ most noticeably in how they move their casting arm. In beginning fly-casting classes, students typically learn a certain arm movement—the one taught by the instructor. Yet students soon begin to differ in such things as how far they move the hand, where they position it, and how firm they keep the wrist. Some of these adaptations interfere with their casting success and require correction. However, other adaptations work well, illustrating what movement analysts call “self-optimization”—a student’s discovery of a more natural or comfortable way to cast.

In observing expert casters, I have been surprised by how many different ways people can vary the hand and arm movements of the cast. As a first step in analyzing such differences, I have lumped them into three general styles, recognized by how the elbow is positioned at the start of the forward cast — forward, up to the side, or low. These positions set the stage for movement differences that have more to do with the shoulder than the elbow. The elbow is a simple hinge that can only open (extend) or close (flex). The shoulder, however, is a ball-and-socket joint that allows the arm to apply force in a variety of ways. This is where most arm variation occurs.

Understanding various types of arm movement allows you to view your own casting stroke in relation to several existing styles. You may even try to imitate movement styles other than your own to see if one of them feels more comfortable.

Elbow Forward

I start a beginning class with what I call the “elbow-forward” style. At the start of the forward cast, your elbow is directly below your hand, which is at ear level and slightly forward of your casting shoulder (Figure 1). This arm and hand position is similar to that seen just prior to releasing a dart or baseball. Positioning your elbow forward of your shoulder invites a forceful use of the forearm through elbow extension to help generate speed.

It is part of an overhand baseball throw, which is called a “kinetic whip” because each body part moves in a whiplike sequence, adding to the overall force.

This upright forearm is also important to accuracy by leading and thus controlling the vertical forward movement of your fly rod and unrolling fly line. I believe this is why most tournament casters use an elbow-forward style

Most elbow-forward casters also use this vertical plane, offset slightly, for the back cast to simplify the fly line’s path as it changes direction from backward to forward. The arm-lifting motion of this back cast is called “shoulder flexion.” Lowering the elbow on the forward cast is “shoulder extension.” This is the arm style of people who have most influenced casting in California, including Jimmy Green, Mel Krieger and Steve and Tim Rajeff. They personify a long-standing link between our interests in tournament fly casting and trout and steelhead fly fishing. The elbow-forward style also characterizes the casts of other notables, such as Joan Wulff, Jerry Siem, and Gary Borger.

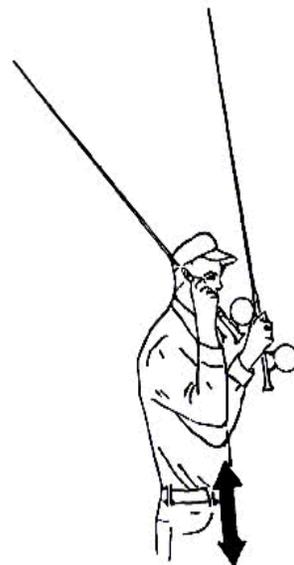


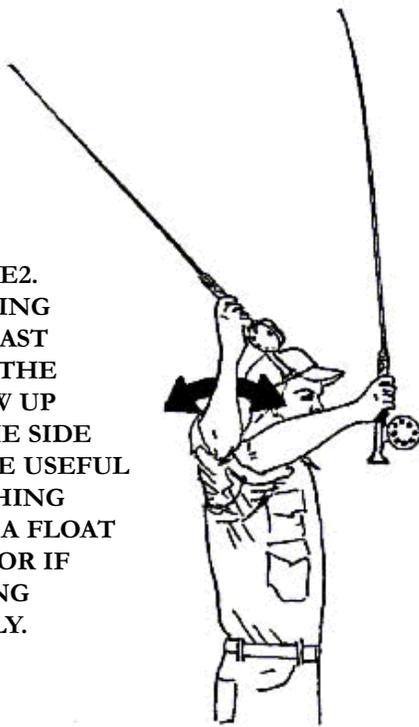
Figure 1. STARTING THE FORWARD CAST WITH THE ELBOW FORWARD CAN ADD FORCE AND ACCURACY TO THE CASTING STROKE.

Elbow Up to the Side

In the “elbow-up-to-the-side” style, the forward cast starts with your elbow positioned directly out to your side at about shoulder level with your casting hand directly above your elbow (Figure 2). In its simplest form, the upper arm acts like a rotisserie, rotating without going anywhere. Thus, on your back cast, your forearm and rod are rotated up and backward around a stationary elbow and then rotated *ahead of your elbow* on your forward cast. This shoulder movement is called “external rotation” on the back cast and “internal rotation” coming forward. Casting instructors sometimes criticize this arm style as being a poor throwing motion because your elbow lags behind your hand. However, this movement relies more on your shoulder, which is exerting force in a strong throwing motion.

I see this casting style most often in fly fishers who habitually cast from a float tube or when wading deep. The need to keep the elbow high and dry invites this shoulder movement. I also see this style used by stream anglers casting nymph riggings with weight on the leader. To avoid tangling, they use wide loops and change the casting plane. Thus, they make a sidearm back cast, then lift the elbow to come forward over the top. Such situational uses of an arm movement can carry over into all your fishing and influence your casting style. A number of casters, including Dan Blanton and Bruce Richards, cast beautiful loops with this style.

FIGURE2. STARTING THE CAST WITH THE ELBOW UP TO THE SIDE CAN BE USEFUL IF FISHING FROM A FLOAT TUBE OR IF WADING DEEPLY.

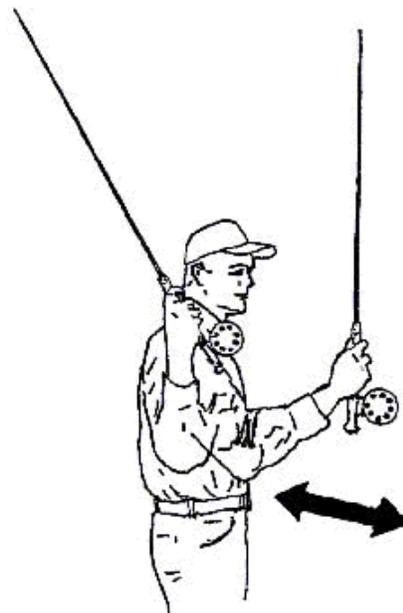


Low Elbow

In the “low-elbow” style, your elbow is kept low, down close to your body, and moved back and forth mostly from the shoulder. Even so, your hand comes up somewhat on the back cast to lift the line and downward on the forward cast enough to keep it from hitting your rod tip (Figure 3). When going for distance, most low-elbow casters open up their stance by dropping the casting side back. This combination of arm style and stance lends itself well to sidearm casting, long strokes, and saltwater fly fishing. The low arm and hand position provides additional strength to help you force a bend into stiff, heavy fly rods, the long arm movement helps control long lines in the wind, and the side-arm cast helps keep heavy rods low and big hooks away from your eyes. In trout-fishing schools, I most often select this style to provide a strong arm position for small or slightly built students, as well as to teach a side-arm cast.

To understand this style better, I recently spent time with Professor Craig Johnson, who teaches both biomechanics and fly casting at Saint Mary’s College, in Moraga [California]. We discovered that this shoulder movement, though occurring in a diagonal, rather than vertical plane, is opposite to that used by elbow-forward casters. In the elbow-forward style, you start with shoulder flexion (lifting the elbow in front) on the back cast, then shoulder extension (lowering the elbow) on the forward cast. This order is reversed in the low-elbow style, where you start with shoulder extension (moving the “low” elbow back) on the back cast, then shoulder flexion (moving the elbow forward) on the forward cast. We were fascinated to learn that the same body part can be moved in the opposite direction, using directly opposing muscle groups, yet produce the identical effect – an overhead cast.

FIGURE3. STARTING THE FORWARD CAST WITH THE ELBOW LOW CAN BE USEFUL IF CASTING SIDEARM AND MAKING LONG STROKES AS WHEN FISHING FROM A FLATS BOAT.



Lefty Kreh, Chico Fernandez (the saltwater expert from Florida), and Californian Jay Clark are excellent low-elbow casters. Some anglers keep the elbow low on short casts, but raise it to cast farther. Other casters combine the movements of these distinctive styles in various ways. So my simple categories don't always differentiate cleanly. However, they do offer a first step in understanding arm styles.

Why do I make a big deal out of different casting styles? Aren't we overanalyzing something that is supposed to be fun? Perhaps so, but information that can simplify your fishing movements and improve your casting skill may add to that fun. I believe such information can also help you appreciate your own cast. In the few years I have been teaching and writing about different styles, I have been surprised by the number of people who have expressed relief in finding that "it's OK" to cast differently than their instructor. If your loops are good, you shouldn't have to feel self-conscious.

So, some of us lift and lower the casting arm, some move it more back and forth, some rotate the forearm around a stationary upper arm, and others combine these movements. I suggest you rig up your fly rod and try to imitate each style. Where does your cast fit within these categories? As you experiment, you may find that several styles feel familiar. Thus, you may already adjust your elbow forward to present a fly accurately to a rising fish. You have probably been forced to keep your elbow high when attempting a long cast with water lapping at the top of your waders. You may also have lowered your arm to force additional bend into a stiff rod. I believe that most versatile fly fishers vary their basic casting strokes in response to fishing conditions such as these. Adaptation is important to successful fishing, even in the way we use our arm to make an overhead cast.

Al Kyte is a founding member of the Board of Governors. This article is reprinted with the permission of the author and first appeared in California FlyFisher magazine, in the regular casting column he writes for it. For subscription information, contact California FlyFisher, P.O.Box 8535, Truckee, CA 96162. Phone 530/587/8702 or e-mail andersoncalfly@cs.com.

Flip the Paint--Really

By Dave Engerbretson

Casting students at all levels sometimes have trouble with the concept of slowly accelerating the casting stroke to a sudden stop in order to form the loop. For years, I have used the analogy of having the student dip an imaginary paintbrush into an imaginary bucket of water, and then imagining themselves trying to snap the water off the brush (as in the casting stroke). I'm sure most instructors are familiar with this little drill, and it usually is very helpful in improving the student's casting stroke. However, I recently ran into a situation in which it did not work.

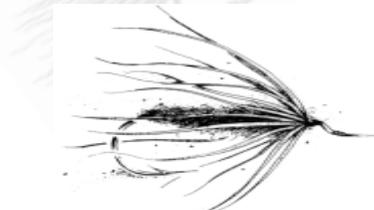
I had an opportunity to teach casting to two boys, James (8), and Ian (11). Both boys are gifted, well-coordinated young athletes, and they love to fish. We had lessons both on the grass and on the water, and though they would occasionally "get it", neither of them could commit the proper stroke to their muscle memory. I used every teaching trick in my bag, including the paintbrush analogy, but nothing seemed to work. I ran out of things to suggest, so I'd repeat myself over and over. Then I'd shut up and let the kids experiment by themselves. I really had thought that I could teach anyone to fly cast, but in these two cases, I seemed to be a failure. And these were my own grandsons!

Finally, it occurred to me that, though I had used the "flip the paint" analogy many times with adult students, I had never actually tried it with real paintbrushes and water. I bought two cheap, four-inch brushes, and called the boys over. I put a large bucket of water between them on my cement driveway where they could see the splashes, and had them start flipping water. The results were almost instantaneous, and were amazing. They could immediately see the result of incorrect strokes and the effect of stopping the rod in the wrong place by the splashes on the cement. It wasn't long before a little competition developed along with their casting strokes.

When we put down the paintbrushes and substituted a fly rod, the improvement in their casting was almost unbelievable. They got it! Interestingly, they loved the drill. After casting for a while, James said, "I want to practice some more." And he went back to the bucket and brush to "flip some more paint." Soon both boys were alternating between the rod and the paintbrush, and their casting strokes continued to improve. A couple of days later, James's mother told me that she had spotted James sitting on the sofa practicing his casting stroke. It looks as though we just might have a couple more fly fishermen in the family.

If you have occasion to teach children to cast, it would be well worth your time to take along some paintbrushes and water buckets to the class. In the meantime, James, Ian and I have a date with some bluegills.

Dave Engerbretson joined the Board of Governors in 1994. A long-time editor and book reviewer at Fly Fisherman magazine, he lives in Moscow, Idaho.



A One-Hour Lesson Plan

By *Bill Gammel*

I have been teaching fly casting under a variety of conditions for many years. My teaching ranges from intensive training in three-day schools to brief 20-minute lessons at sports shows or in fly shops. For years, I struggled with how to organize the different lessons. Should I always start with the roll cast and go through the traditional steps of teaching, or should I have a different lesson plan for each of the different settings and time-frames? Developing the foundation used in the longer schools was simply not feasible when working at a sports show. Often, I am asked to show someone the basics of fly casting in just a few minutes. The result of my struggle has changed the way I teach all of my classes, no matter how in-depth.

I teach five essential elements of fly casting, and it is difficult to convey these principles to a beginner in a short period of time. In order to avoid that glassy eyed stare that comes from telling a beginner to do five things at once, I developed the following lesson plan. I have successfully taught the following steps, from forming ground loops to shooting, in as little as 20 minutes. However, I also use this lesson plan in my longer classes and schools, where we spend more time on each step.

Forming Ground Loops

- Show the student some good casts so he knows what they look like.
- Explain that order to make a straight-line cast, the caster must move the rod tip in approximately a straight line.
- Face the student 90 degrees from the target, with 20 feet of line beyond the rod tip and place the casting hand in front of the body.
- Explain that there is a specific stroke length to be used for this specific length of line. Have the student to move the rod the correct distance by sliding the rod tip along the ground. Make sure that the student is casting hard enough to form a loop. When he can consistently slide good loops along the ground at this length, it is time to move ahead.

Timing and False Casting

Explain and demonstrate the proper timing of a cast. Raise the caster's hand to belt high and have him make the same stroke as before, waist high. As he does this (if the loops look correct) have him increase the pace until he is properly false casting in a sidearm position.

Style

Help the student select a comfortable style. Show him several style options and help him change arm positions and foot positions. Help him select the style he finds the most comfortable and easy to correctly perform the cast. (If time is limited, make a style suggestion and move on to the next step.)

The Pick-up and Lay-down

After the student has chosen a style and false cast successfully for a period of time, teach the pick up and lay down. This is usually done in about 30 seconds if the previous stages are done correctly. From this point forward, the instructor must emphasize muscle memory on each of the following steps.

Stroke Length + Timing ~ Distance

Explain that stroke length and timing vary as the length of line beyond the rod tip varies. Add one foot of fly line to the student's cast and let him try again. If the caster is doing well, add another foot of line. Continue the process until the head of the line is out of the rod. (I use short-headed lines such as a bass bug taper.) If time permits, spend a good deal of time on each foot of progress. This does a good job of building muscle memory, or "grooving" the stroke. The more patient you are at this stage the better your results.

Application of Power

Starting again with 20 feet of line to beyond the rod tip, the student should start false casting as softly as possible. Tell him, "Try to cast without bending the rod." For each successive cast add a small amount of power, thus, increasing the line speed. Each cast should get faster and faster. Once the student has really experienced a fully flexed rod and made a smooth cast, then add another foot of line and repeat. Slowly work the line out until the head is out of the rod tip. At this stage, the student should be able to vary the timing, stroke length, and power application so as to move the rod tip in a straight line.

Shooting

The last step is to learn to shoot line. (If student can shoot 6-8 feet, strip it in, and shoot it back out, then they feel as though they can go fishing.) Explain the downfall of allowing slack to form in the cast and where it might occur. Let the student false cast while holding the line in the line hand. When the student is comfortable false casting while holding the line, then explain the timing of the release. Once this concept is understood, let the student give it a try.

Add Water

The roll cast, slack line casts, and accuracy and distance casts can all be added at this point.

I encourage everyone to be creative in their teaching. This outline will not work for everyone, nor should it. I do, however, feel that everyone should be open to change and adapt his or her teaching style when necessary. If it is not working, don't be afraid to fix it, even if your method strays from tradition.

Bill Gammel is a member of the Board of Governors and lives near Houston, Texas. His baby boy has already mastered the single haul.

The Loop Has Gnu Editors

By Macauley Lord

The Loop has two new editors. Governor Denise Maxwell and Master Elizabeth Watson have generously volunteered to take over the reigns of this publication. They will give you a quarterly that takes you in some great new directions. I know you will be happy with the change; the smallmouth bass near my home in Maine will be unhappy with it.

Denise Maxwell, an extraordinary single-handed and two-handed caster, won the World Fly Casting Championship in 1984. She was the first licensed woman steelhead guide in British Columbia and runs a steelhead camp on the Bulkley River. She has degrees in both biology and teaching. With her husband, Mike, she is the co-producer of all the Maxwell books and videos on speycasting and spey fishing. She joined the Board of Governors in 1995.

Liz Watson is an academic veterinary radiologist living and practicing in Florida. She currently edits the journal of the International Women Fly Fishers. They can be found at <http://www.intlwomenflyfishers.org>. Liz does her own illustrations and layout. An exceptional casting writer, she is also the author of a wealth of scholarly articles on veterinary radiology. Her husband, Greg, is a Certified Casting Instructor. She became a Master in 2001.

From the Editor

Reverence for Our Peers, Our Teachers—Once again Al Kyte's teaching graces the pages of The Loop. His technical virtuosity aside, one aspect of his teaching that resonates with me is the respect he pays to his peers. It's hard to have a conversation with Al or read an article of his without hearing about one or many of Al's peers, about how they cast or teach. I see the same quality in many teachers I admire. Bill Gammel's video, *Teaching Yourself to Fly Cast*, shows the camera panning over Jim Green's book, *Fly Casting From the Beginning*. Jason Borger's book, *Nature of Fly Casting*, is encyclopedically full of references to those who influenced him. Dave Whitlock used to say that he learned more about trout fishing from Doug Swisher than from anyone else. This recognition of one's teachers inspires me. After all, what are we as casting instructors if we are not, in part, celebrating the fellowship we have with our teachers, our students, our friends?

Master and Governor, What's the Difference?

At the last Livingston Conclave, I was remarking to Floyd Franke about the impressive caliber of the Masters who attended. Many took the time to attend the Board of Governors annual meeting and express their thoughts about improving the program. Some offered casting and teaching clinics. I had the honor of casting and chatting with some of them in the days that followed and I told Floyd that I hope to see many of them join the board.

Floyd's response was amusing but accurate. "We [Governors] are just a bunch of pencil pushers: we administer the program. The Masters are the ones who are really starting to do the work on the front lines by offering teaching clinics and certification tests." He added that he saw no difference in casting skill, on the whole, between Governors and Masters. "If they cast and teach well enough to be a Master, they cast and teach well enough to be a Governor."

John Gayewski—Many of you have been blessed over the years, as have I, to work with John Gayewski, who joined the board in 1996. A gifted teacher of profound kindness and humility, John is afflicted with Type 2 diabetes and has lost most of his sight. For compelling medical reasons, John has moved to the warmth of Florida. He invites any and all to call him or call on him at:

Aspen Willowwood, Room 175
2855 W. Commercial Blvd.
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309
(954) 731-6785

John's struggle with his health is a reminder of our ephemerality. (My brother, who is in a wheelchair, refers to me as "temporarily able-bodied.") John's medical condition brings to mind others among our ranks whom we didn't see at Conclave this year. Founding BOG members Jim Green, now emeritus, and Dave Engerbretson were kept away by long-term health challenges. So was Jack Sherrill, who ably chaired the BOG through some years of rapid growth. So the next time you see a mayfly, think of John and Jim and Dave and Jack and make another cast for them.

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YOU CAN HAVE A LINK from your FFF Website listing to your own E-mail address. Contact Julie Nelson

We welcome your submissions via E-mail or disk. Please attach a short instructor bio (1-3 sentences), including your location and Certification level. Please indicate whether or not you are willing to allow for your submission's possible republication on the Program's Website. Any illustrations should be in TIFF format. The Loop reserves the right to accept or decline any submission for any reason, and to edit any submission as it sees fit. All submissions should be sent to the National Office:

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COMING EVENTS

Pre-registration is REQUIRED!

Contact Julie Nelson at (406) 585-7592

Schedule subject to change

Denver, CO - Jan 3-5; The Fly Fishing Show; Master Certification prep workshop with Dusty Sprague; contact (800) 420-7582 or www.flyfishingshow.com

Los Angeles, CA - Jan 9-12 International Sportsmen's Show; Pre-register by Dec 27

College Park, MD - Jan 11-12; The Fly Fishing Show; Certified Inst. & Masters; must preregister by Dec 27

Marlborough, MA - Jan 17-19; The Fly Fishing Show; Certified Inst. & Masters; must preregister by Jan 3

Somerset, NJ - Jan 24-26; The Fly Fishing Show; Certified Instructor & Masters; must preregister by Jan 10

San Mateo, CA - Jan 29-Feb 2; International Sportsmen's Expo; Certified Inst. & Masters; must preregister by Jan 17

Portland, OR - Feb 5-9; O'Loughlin Trade Show; Certified Instructor & Masters; must preregister by Jan 24

Calgary, Alberta- Feb 7-9; Western Canadian Fly Fishing Expo; Pre-register by Jan 24

Charlotte, NC - Feb 14-16; The Fly Fishing Show; Certified Instructor & Masters; must preregister by Jan 31

Seattle, WA- Feb 22-23; The Fly Fishing Show; Pre-registration by Feb 7

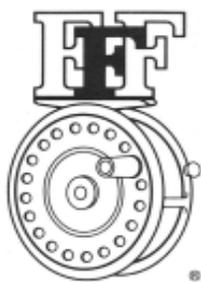
Phoenix, Ariz - Feb 27-Mar 2; International Sportsmen's Expo; Pre-register by Feb 7

Toronto, Ontario- April 6; Issac Walton Fishing Forum; Pre-register by March 31

Long Beach, CA- May 5-9; Fred Hall Show; Pre-register by April 29.

Gulf Shores, AL- May 15-17; Southeast Council Conclave; Pre-register by May 5

Freeport, ME- LL Bean 2-day workshop & certification with Macauley Lord; contact Craig Uecker to pre-register at 800-341-4341 ext 22666; 2003 Dates: April 5-6, April 12-13, Aug 2-3, Aug 23-24.



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