The Adaptive Caster

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Loops!

The loop is the signature of your casting stroke. Like a mark on the page left by your pen, the loop tells just how you have moved your fingers, hands, arm, and body. Learning to judge your own loops, and to then adjust your casting stroke to make the loops you want, will make you a more adaptable caster. We'll talk about loops is this column. In future columns we'll talk about how to control loops and how to diagnose and correct loop control problems.

Loop control is cast control. Your loop is your only connection with the target. The fly sits back at the end of the leader and pulled toward the target. The leaner and more energetic your loop, the more direct and smooth is this ride to the target. And the less you have to work to make it happen. The loop tells a story about how you approach the cast, the care and precision that you put into the movement, even your state of mind on the water. Each cast is a tiny journey. And that line unrolling above you is a report on how you are enjoying the trip. How many of us have seen the jagged, tense loops of a "cast puncher" and wondered, "Is he really having fun?" Throwing relaxed loops that are matched to casting objective is turning casting from a chore to a pleasure.

The path of the rod tip, determined by how you load and you unload the rod, shapes the loop. A straight rod tip path results in a tight, efficient loop because most of its energy has been transferred from the rod straight toward the target. A convex or "domed" path results in a wide open loop. Many beginning casters throw these wide loops before they learn to better control their wrist and arm movements. A concave or "dipping" path results in a tailing loop where the top of the loop falls below the bottom. Besides creating tangles and "wind knots", tailing loops are diversions of energy and real problems for casting accuracy. Tailing loops are caused by improper application and release of power, strokes that are stopped too early or too high or are too short for the length of line being cast. Tailing loops are often problems for intermediate casters who try to apply more power in their attempts to cast farther or into the wind. There are lots of theories and opinions about the causes and corrections for the tailing loop, but their essence is that for redemption, you have to get the rod tip moving in a straight line.

The rod tip path is determined of course by how you synchronize the movement of your fingers (grip), hand (wrist), forearm (elbow), upper arm (shoulder), and even your body (feet). It's a lot less complicated than walking out to pick up the newspaper. But it takes practice and thinking about how your movement affects the movement of the rod tip. That long rod magnifies subtle human movements. It may be difficult to tell where the tip is moving when most of the cast is

behind you or over your head, but the line will tell, if you watch it. Lefty Kreh has often said that a good caster watches the line all the time on every cast. You have to learn to connect what you see (the loop) with what you feel (you) and learn to enjoy them both. A good loop is always preceded by a sensuous tension as you smoothly load the rod, and a snappy salute as you launch the loop on its 2-second mission.

What do you look for? Four characteristics: size, shape, alignment, and trajectory (vertical as well as horizontal) to the target.

Loop size is the distance between the top and the bottom of the loop as it unrolls. Loops more than about 2 feet tall are big loops; Tight loops can as short as only a few inches. A loop is tight because more of its energy is directed at the target, and it cuts through the air more easily, like a sharp instrument. Big loops are inherently less efficient because their energy is being dissipated out along the perimeter of the loop in many different directions. The big loop also provides a bigger profile, like a sail, that encounters more wind resistance. Physics experiments have shown that is takes about half the human energy to throw a tight loop as it does a big one. Tight loops are essential for casting into the wind, long distances, for long time periods, and for specialized casts such as punching flies underneath low-hanging obstructions. Tight loops are generally more responsive to adjustments needed for accuracy or presentation casts like mending the line in the air.

Tight loops are not the best choice for every casting task. Big loops can be useful in presenting weighted or bulky flies, casting sinking lines, and taking advantage of a following wind to sail out a long cast. But the trick is to be able to control the loop size to fit the situation … one of the hallmarks of an adaptive caster.

Loop shape refers to its symmetry. A perfect loop unrolls along its own flat base. It stretches out like a contrail, taking line from the top of the loop. A well-shaped loop is like a ball of yarn unrolling along the kitchen floor, straight out from the rod tip. Problems in loop shapes ranges from the wide-open, scythe of the novice to the dreaded closed or tailing loop. Loop shapes can have all kinds of blemishes like sags and wiggles and waves that indicate "opportunities for improvement". We'll talk about those in later columns.

Loop alignment is the angle between the top and bottom of the loop as viewed from straight behind or in front of the caster. A perfect vertical alignment, with the top unrolling in line with the bottom is very efficient. Many people who throw slightly sidearm casts or tilt their wrists to the right or left tend to throw a slightly off-vertical alignment. From a side view, their loops may even appear to be tailing loops, but since the top and the bottom of the loop are traveling in slightly different planes, they do not tangle or "tick". Loops that are purposely off-vertical a few degrees can help avoid line ticking with big air-resistant or weighted flies, but too much misalignment can waste energy and require the caster to use more elbow grease to get the cast there.

Loop trajectory has horizontal and vertical dimensions. Vertical trajectory is the degree of incline in the line path from the rod tip to the target. In most short casts, the loop can unroll on a slightly downward path, but on longer casts or in presentation casts that require the line to spend some time in the air for mending, the path needs to be more inclined. Incline is the analog of "elevation" in shooting parlance. How you tilt your stroke and how and where you stop or “unload” the rod control the loop’s trajectory. Many of us have trouble adjusting the incline to the variable distances we encounter in fishing situations. We tend to incline the cast too little on long casts, and overthrow short ones. Another problem is inclining both the backcast and the foreward cast too much, moving the rod tip in that concave path and causing --- you guessed it --- a tailing loop.

Horizontal trajectory in analogous to “windage”. It is a measure of how closely your flyline unrolls on an imaginary straight line between your eye and the target. A lot of “windage” problems start from failing to throw the backcast directly opposite the target or sweeping the arm around the body through the stroke. The old adage applies: the line follows the rod tip. Many casters can improve their windage immediately by merely looking at the target, letting their body take the stroke directly at the target.

Watch your loops while you are practicing your casts. Notice their size, shape, alignment, and trajectory. Any changes you want to make? We will return in future columns to work on them.

Tight loops,

Dave

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