

## **Adaptive Caster by Dave Cleaves**

### **Backcasts—Improving the Hidden Half of Your Cast**

We fly casters are always striving to better connect with the fish – casting farther, into tricky places, with different flies, and in challenging winds and complicated surroundings. When we have trouble meeting these challenges, we blame our forward casting stroke and look for solutions there. But all too often the limits begin behind us, hidden from us in a backcast that is not straight, aligned, or well-timed. Without a good backcast, too much of our effort in the forward cast is spent removing slack, finding the path to the target, and getting the line to behave. Because the backcast precedes and shapes your options in the forward stroke, we cannot be fully adaptive to casting situations if we do not backcast well. Let's understand and improve what is going on behind our own backs.

The backcast is a key part of the basic casting cycle which includes the pickup of the line off the water; the backcast; the forward cast; and the lowering of the rod to follow the line back down to the target. The basic backcast stroke accelerates from the lifting motion of the pickup back to a stop and pause as the loop leaves the rod tip and unrolls. Then the forward stroke reverses out along a straight path to the target. Up-and- back, down-and-out, upper arm and forearm working together along with a controlled and very limited use of the wrist and hand in stopping the rod at the ends of both strokes to launch their loops. Try the backcast stroke motion by throwing water from a cup over your shoulder, being careful not get your shoulder wet. You must start slowly, then speed up and stop to expel the water out away from you. It is the same motion as your forward stroke but in the opposite direction.

#### **Problems**

The backcast offers challenges because we are not as strong or as skilled in throwing things behind us or in making precise movements to the rear. The most common problems in making backcasts are:

1. Picking the line off the water starting with rod tip too high and/or with too much slack,
2. Not accelerating the rod backward smoothly to a crisp stop to launch the loop,
3. Dropping the rod tip in back, and
4. Rushing into the forward stroke before the back loop has sufficiently unrolled

I covered the first problem in our last column ([link](#)) about improving the pickup. We'll look at problems 3 and 4 next.

#### **What is happening back there?**

My mother would have made a good fly caster. Like many mothers, she had eyes in the back of her head. I was never able to get away with much. It was part vision and part vigilance. She assumed that I was usually going to be "into something" and she was always ready to respond to cues. We all need to similarly "mother" our backcast. What you do not correct in the backcast shows up as problems and unmet objectives in the forward stroke.

## Watching the backcast—and making corrections

It is helpful to watch your backcast at least occasionally, to get the visual cues for adjustments such as when to start forward. But only if the movement of turning to watch does not interfere with the accuracy of the overall cast and your ability to adapt it to different fishing situations. Watching every backcast can result in the habit of taking your eyes off the target and/or twisting the path of the backstroke as you turn to look.

When you do watch the backcast, **be deliberate**. Watch for three things: (1) loop, (2) trajectory, and (4) timing.

**Loop**—Backcast loops are as important, maybe even more so than the forward loop with which you deliver the fly. Without an energetic unfolding of the back loop, you have little to pull forward against to bending the rod during the forward stroke. You are looking for the line to unroll straight behind you with the bottom and the top of the loop less than 4 feet apart. In general, narrower loops indicate that more of the energy is directed at the target. If the loop is too wide, sags along the bottom, is more circular than elliptical, or just collapses, you have a backcast loop problem. It often comes from sweeping too far and/or in a downward path in back or from hinging your wrists backward. Because of the weak back loop, you may have trouble feeling the rod bend as you make the forward cast and casting harder in trying to find it, only making things worse by bending the rod erratically, creating forward loops only an abstract artist could appreciate. Backcast again and try for a straighter path back and up and stopping the rod more with a squeeze with the hand than with wrist motion.

**Trajectory**—Where is the back loop headed? Into the ground (water)? Up in the sky? It should be directly opposite the path you want the forward cast to travel – *out over the target*, which is usually close to horizontal. If the loop crashes into the water or veers off to the side, your attempts in making a straight, forward cast will be difficult. Try your next backcast pulling the rod butt straight back and up to a point behind you, higher to set up for shorter forward casts (down angled) and a little lower for longer forward casts (i.e., angled up to compensate for distance).

**Timing**—You should start forward just as the backcast loop finishes – where the loop has licked out to where leader itself is being pulled into the unfolding motion. If you wait too long, the loop unrolls completely and falls to the ground. If you start forward too soon, while the loop is still unrolling, the forward cast does not have enough tension (rod bend) to propel the cast. The length of pause needed is longer with a longer cast because it takes longer for the line to unroll.

Waiting for the backcast loop to unroll is not a natural act. We humans are impatient, especially when we cannot see what is going on behind us or there is big fish out in front who is even more impatient than we are. Watching and even listening to the backcast can help develop your timing. Stop dead and watch the line until it is almost unrolled before starting forward. Watch for any tendency to creep or bolt into the forward cast too early. If you hear a “crack” or “snap”, you have started forward too soon, too fast, snapping the end of the line like a bullwhip. One way to prevent creeping or bolting is to continue moving your hand back and up a few inches along the backcast path after you launch the loop (stop the rod). This follow-through is called “drift”. It does not interfere with the loop unrolling but discourages creeping because it is not possible to drift back and creep forward at the same time. And gives you a longer forward stroke.

## Watching your body and developing a feel for the backcast

There are ways to improve your backcast stroke without putting a kink in your neck. The object is to use images of your own casting stroke and your corrections to teach yourself what a good cast feels like. One technique is to observe yourself cast in the reflection of your upper body movement in a car side window or the glass walls of a commercial building. You can see immediately whether you sweep your arm down in back or hinge your wrists and you will begin to self-correct. Do the reps and get it touch with what it feels like to maintain rod bending tension through the back and forward strokes.

Another tip is look down occasionally at the angle between the butt of your rod and your forearm at the point as you stop the rod to launch the backcast. If that angle is 45 degrees or more, you have probably thrown your backcast toward the ground or water behind you. Try to keep that angle much smaller, closer to 10-20 degrees by keeping a firmer wrist. If you have trouble, try sticking the butt of the rod in the sleeve of your long sleeve shirt; the pressure on the cuff will remind you that you are hinging back. You do not have to keep the sleeve implant forever. After you get the feel, take the rod back out and set yourself partially free. Try using a wide rubber band also gives you a signal without looking so goofy. Stiffen the wrist and your loop will shape up immediately into a classic candy cane.

Try to remember what it feels to make a good backcast as you watch both your body and the cast itself respond. Feel the tension from the rod bending, the smooth acceleration, the gentle “thunk” when the rod unloads, and the precious stillness as the line unrolls behind. Watch your backcast when you or an observer detects problems and start to associate how the cast responds with how a good backcast feels. If you feel the rod tension leave your stroke, you have slack somewhere. Correct it and learn what it feels like to find the tension again. Then get back to casting without watching every cast, striving for the up and back groove, the steadily rising tension, and the instantaneous flick that sends the loop off. Practice with your eyes closed to force yourself to feel the cast. You will be surprised how quickly you will develop a more instinctive backcast.

### Practice Tips:

- **Pantomime your stroke** in the mirror at home or use a laser pointer, gripping it as if it were a rod handle and trace the path of your stroke with the red dot path across the ceiling. The dot does not lie and gives you immediate feedback about how your hand traveled and how crisply you stopped the “rod”.
- **Practice with a partner.** Give each other an extra set of eyes and some real-time feedback on loop shape, timing, and body movement. A partner can be a great help in timing by using a “now” voice signal, a hand clap, or a click from a dog training “clicker” available in pet stores to prompt you when to start forward. With their help, you develop the timing, and it gives them a sense of power over you. But then you know the real story...right?
- **Videotape your casts.** Use video feature on your smartphone or tablet and enhance it with an app such as Huddle Technique <https://www.hudl.com/products/technique> or Coach’s Eye <https://www.coachseye.com/> Ask a partner to shoot footage or set the device on a tripod or stand and video yourself. Use the selfie display mode to watch your hand and arm movement and let it guide you to self-correct in real-time.

- **Use a sidearm stroke** and turn your body so you can see the rod tip travel and the loop unroll backward and forward. Do this exercise tracing the path of the rod tip over a straight line such as an outstretched rope or the wheel marks of a lawn mower. The loops should also travel parallel to the straight path and any that fall your side the line means you have swept your arm too far toward you or allowed your wrist to bend too far. This is the equivalent of throwing the backcast down in the vertical plane. You can also develop your timing by casting different lengths and adjusting the pause time. Gradually move back to your normal casting plane but do not hesitate to use sidearm when you need to see how body, rod, and line can work better together.
- **Aim every backcast.** Pick an imaginary dot in the sky behind and above you straight back from your casting target. Pick up the line and pull the rod up along that path and pinch the rod to a stop at the dot. Aiming a cast seems to bring casting skills together toward a goal, even if you are imagining rather than seeing it. Learning to aim the backcast will help in situations where you have limited open space behind you or you must deliver the fly with the backcast as you might in a heavy wind, from a crowded or shifting boat, or to reach fish that rise behind you with so little respect for fair play.
- **Focus your practice** by making only backcasts. Let the line fall to the grass or water behind you with each back stroke, swivel your body 180 degrees and pick up the line into another backcast let it fall. And so forth. Each backcast starts with a pickup that also gives you practice in managing the slack, lifting smoothly, and taking it seamlessly into the back stroke. It allows you to check each stroke to see whether the line stretches out straight behind you, directly opposite where you would have taken the corresponding forward stroke. A serious diversion from this straight target path means wasted energy and reduced control in taking the cast to the target. You can tell immediately if you are twisting too much, swinging your arms, or loosening your grip to allow the rod to sculpt around you.

Remember. Behind every good cast is a good backcast stroke. The work you do on the backcast will make your forward stroke easier and more adaptable. Tight lines, stern and bow.

*Dave Cleaves of North Potomac is an IFFF-certified fly-casting instructor (CI, MCI), who teaches fly casting and guides in Maryland. Dave is retired from the US Forest Service and has worked for Trout & About (Phil Gay) and the LL Bean Outdoor Discovery schools. He is a member of the Seneca Valley Trout Unlimited Chapter.*