

## The Adaptive Caster by Dave Cleaves

### Good Starts for a Good Cast—Low, Slow, and Slackless Pickups

The basic cast is a fluid motion in four parts – the pickup of the line off the water; the backcast; the forward cast; and the lowering of the rod to follow the line down to the fish. Each part depends on the one before, so problems in casting efficiency and fly delivery can often be corrected by paying some attention to what went on early in the cast. Aside from getting set up well on the stream or in the boat, the pickup is the first and arguably the most important part of the casting cycle. But we sometimes take the pickup for granted, rushing through it to the more dynamic and exciting parts of the cast. But those intoxicating loops and presentations all start with lifting the line off the water smoothly and quietly. What we end with on the forward cast and delivery – good or bad – started in front of us on the pickup. So if we are having problems – not feeling the rod bend or having it bend too much at the wrong times, we will see it in the loop, but it may have started during the pickup. Let's start at the beginning, check out our pickup, and if need be, correct it.

The pickup is really an extension of setting up the cast so that slack line is minimized or managed so that it doesn't interfere with the casting cycle. Slack is usually right in our face – in waves and piles on the water, in the belly beneath the rod tip, in sags between the rod guides, and in front and behind our line hand. If we pick up the rod tip to start a cast, we are spending lots of energy and casting space in just straightening it out rather than bending the rod from the tip. We have to get rid of the slack before the pickup begins or it will follow us into the cast.

One common mistake is to start the pickup with the rod tip held too high, angled out to be above our shoulder or even our head. This allows a sagging belly of flyline to form below the rod tip even before the pickup starts. This slack must be straightened out before it begins to bend the rod. And the high position limits the distance we can move the rod during the pickup and the backcast to keep the rod bend progressing to the point behind us where we stop the rod and launch the backcast. So with the high start we burden the cast with slack and rob it of distance it would take to straighten it. It often leads us to reach way back during the backcast to "find" the tension of the rod against a straight line, only to throw the backcast down toward the ground or in a big swooping circle behind us, spoiling chances of a good forward stroke.

A second common mistake is to pick up the line up too quickly. We sometimes blast the fly off the water like a sub-launched missile, startling all forms of life and bending the rod grotesquely for the beginning of the backcast stroke. That often just pulls the fly under rather than lifts it off and when it does, it comes off the water in a loud "POP". We may try to slide the line rapidly along the water with a forearm pull and backward bending the wrist, but when the fly leaves the water, it breaks free and zings backward like a ricochet bullet and too close for comfort. It is impossible to accelerate smoothly into the backcast we already moved the line as fast as we can just getting the line off the water. All it can do is decelerate somewhere in the cast and the result is usually a closed or tailing loop that forms as rod tip springs up from its bend.

Here are a few tips for making each pick up low, slow, and slackless.

1. **Get the slack out.** Strip in line with your opposite hand. No squiggles on the water and no sags between the guides. The line out beyond the rod tip on the water should be pointing straight to the leader. The only loose line below the rod tip should be behind your line hand or the place where you pinched the line against the rod handle. You may have to roll cast the line out to straighten it, a great use of the roll cast not often talked about.
2. **Start low.** Start the pick-up with the tip just touching the water in front of you.
3. **Lift slowly.** Lift – don't pull the line like you are lifting a skillet carefully from a hot stovetop. Lift slowly *excruciating so at first* to gradually peel the line closest to your rod tip inch-by-inch out to the leader's attachment before you shift at about 45 degrees into the back and upward pulling motion of the backcast. You will feel the rod is starting to progressively bend against first the water tension and the line's weight, but it the line will rise straight up in the channel you created for it right into a straight path for the backcast. Like an archer smoothly drawing the bow, you are giving the backcast and the rest of the cast, a smooth start and plenty of room to make the following strokes. Your presentation and the chances of connecting with the fish will be the better for it.

### [Watch a video by FFI Casting Instructor Bruce Richards](#)

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