

Summary

In the traditional overhead cast, you stop the rod at the end of the back cast and pause for the loop to unroll before starting forward. The article below introduces you to oval casting, its benefits, basic instructions, and some applications.

In the oval cast you take the rod back and forward in separate planes (degrees from vertical or tilt) and maintain continuous tension throughout the combined stroke. The oval cast extends the conditions in which you can cast more comfortably and makes you a more versatile angler.

It can help you deal with big and/or heavy rigs, wind, back cast obstructions, and irregular casting positions. Your ability to maintain contact with the line tension through the rod allows you to shape the path of the rod and line to fit the available casting space. You can easily combine oval and traditional strokes.

Situation: Working a small stream from the bank. Behind you and out over the stream are overhanging trees with a short casting lane beneath. Upstream ahead of you is a gentle run whose subtle crosscurrents will require you to cast high to allow you to drop enough slack leader on the water to let your fly drift freely.

Situation: Hunting redfish in the marshes of South Louisiana. The wind through and over the marsh grass pushes your line into your side and that big Clouser kicks down at the end of every back cast. The grumpy guide at the stern of the boat doesn't want to get whacked any more than you do.

Each of these situations shows barriers to the traditional overhead, straight back-and-forth, pause-between-strokes cast. Namely, limited back cast space, high demands for line control (slack or big fly placement), and overall resistance (branches, grass, and wind). What casting adjustments do they call for?

Enter the oval style of casting, also called the elliptical, Belgian, Austrian, constant tension, wind cast, swing-around, and other names. It is a different twist on bending the rod and launching the loop to the target. You may already be using some of the oval cast elements in your casting without knowing it. They can be developed into another casting tool for handling difficult situations like those above.

Part 1: How is the Oval Cast Different?

In the oval cast you take the rod back and forward in separate planes (degrees from vertical or tilt) and maintain continuous tension throughout the combined stroke. That usually means an off-vertical (tilted) to a near-horizontal plane for the back stroke rotated into a vertical or near-vertical forward stroke. The rod climbs behind in a curving path as it goes back then makes a U-turn and finishes straight out ahead with a smooth acceleration to a stop as in any traditional cast.

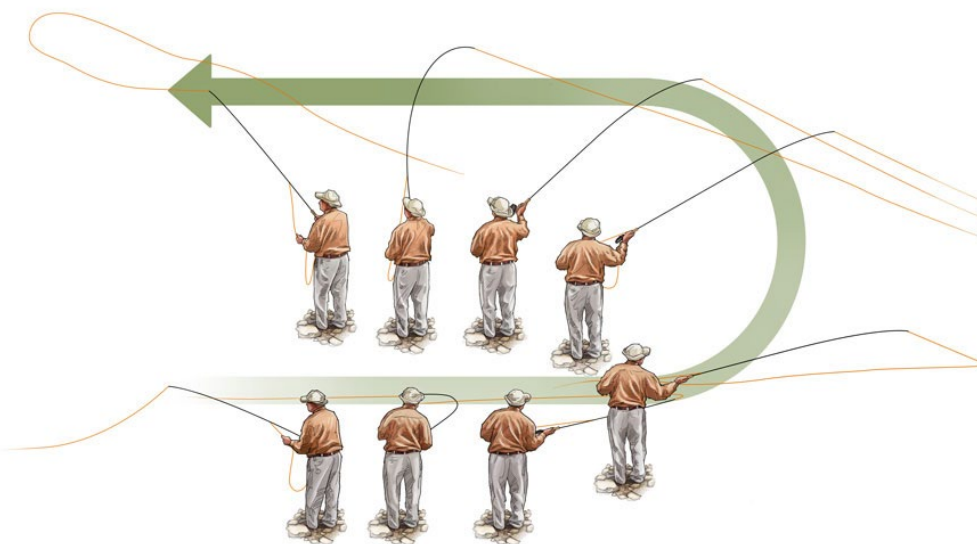


Image with permission of Joe Mahler, fly fishing author/illustrator and casting instructor in Ft. Myers, Florida

VIDEO: Stop here and watch [this Orvis video](#) to see an oval cast and how to make it.

Instead of a two-part movement with a pause, the oval cast is one, continuous motion – the back and forward movements appear to be fused and pulling the line in an oval around you. This path can be shaped to meet the casting situation - from wide to narrow, symmetric like a “racetrack”, or irregular like a tear drop. Because the planes are separated, the rod paths can be tilted out or in or even taken over your head from one side of your body to the other without the top and bottom parts of the unrolling loop touching. The oval can also be reversed with a vertical back cast being turned around into a more horizontal forward cast to hit low targets, e.g., along a brushy shoreline. The oval cast is similar in some ways to roll and spey casts in that you are bending (loading) the rod from a circular back cast, but the oval is not interrupted by setting up a line segment on the water (anchor) as a base for starting to bend the rod on the forward stroke.

The oval cast gives you a long effective stroke since you are pulling the rod around a curve and keeping it moving right into the forward stroke. The cast can be made smoothly with less need for a stroke-stop-pause-stroke sequence or repetitive false casting which can spook fish and expose line and rigs to trees, and all those other gremlins that eat tackle. With this cast, you can more easily control how the loop unfolds, for example by being able to send the line under the rod tip to unroll the loop from below to avoid low-hanging limbs or to skip the fly on the water.

You can see the difference between the traditional and some oval cast movements by revisiting some of the scenes in the movie “A River Runs Through It”. In early scenes the brothers are learning the traditional overhead stroke set to their father’s off-screen drills to the “four-part rhythm”. Later in the movie is the now famous scene of character Paul McClean (Brad Pitt) integrating elements of the oval cast in the “Shadow Cast” in a metaphorical turning point as Paul breaks his father’s casting rules to meet the situation. Actually, this scene was more casting ballet than practical fishing, but it evoked freedom in casting styles.

The traditional stroke sequence is not wrong. It has many decades of successful use. But the oval makes some moves easier and more forgiving of timing. You can feel your way through the whole stroke set and correct quickly without having to recast repeatedly. You spend less time waiting for the loop to unroll while the wind has its way with it. And less chance of creating slack or coming forward too early because you couldn’t see the back cast. You have in effect glued the back and forward strokes together and can stay connected by feel as well as eye contact.

Your ability to maintain contact with the line tension allows you to shape the path of the strokes to fit the available casting space. If you have an opening to the side and behind you, perhaps overhung with branches, you can pull the back cast path low and curved through the opening and around into the forward stroke to deliver. You keep most of the bend in the rod without having to let it unroll into dangerous territory then try to snap it forward before it grabs the bushes. Because you make more effective use of the back cast space, the linear distance you can cast out front does have to be matched by the same linear distance in the back cast.

A Casting Tool Worth Learning

Benefits

Depending on the situation, you could discover some benefits from adding the oval style to your tool kit:

- Fewer tangles. Because sudden stops and sharp angles breed terrible tangles, the moving tension and rounded path of the oval helps avoid disaster. Because the back and forward strokes travel in different planes, you are less likely to have the fly and leader crash or wrap around the line below it. You control the amount of separation by varying the outward angle between the back and forward as well as the width of the unrolling loop. Keeping that separation through continuous tension allows you to reverse from back to forward without stopping. That

can keep the fly from swinging or kicking down at the end of the back cast with that sickening “thump”.

- Fewer tailing loops. Because you don't have to abruptly start, stop, wait, restart, and speed up in each stroke, you can concentrate on a longer and smoother stroke throughout the movement. This gives more time and space to keep the line tight. Even when a tailing loop happens, the separation the line planes make it less likely to tangle.
- Less frustration with heavy flies, multiple fly rigs, split shot, and sinking lines. With the traditional cast, you often do not have time to reverse from back to forward (or vice versa) before it is overtaken by the heavy rig that has been sent zinging. Casting becomes like leash-walking an untrained puppy. With the oval, there is less chance of you or your rod being hit because one or both strokes are tilted out in separate planes and less likely to kick down because it is moving behind a tight line. Read more in the 2008 [“Weighty Adjustments”](#) article in the SVTU Adaptive Caster column.
- Easier to wrangle big buoyant flies like bass bugs and decked-out streamers. They can sap energy out of the unrolling loop and are so fickle in the wind that casting becomes a faith-based act. Maintaining continuous tension keeps the line and its cargo moving and more responsive to the use of the hauling motion with the line hand to add even more umph.
- Easier to handle the wind. The wind obeys no one, but you can better manage the line even under the influence of the wind by keeping the slack stretched out and minimizing false casting. The separated planes allow you to combine a low back stroke with a climbing more vertical forward stroke to let a tailwind give the loop a boost like a sail. Different combinations of planes can be used with head winds or with sidewinds against your casting or off-casting side. See the excellent article in the digital Fly Fisherman magazine on casting in the wind by the famous instructor and illustrator [Joe Mahler](#). See more of Joe's illustrations in the great book [Performance Fly Casting by Jon Cave](#).
- Dealing with back cast limitations and target obstructions. You can shape the back cast to make use of the area available to avoid snags or slide in and out of tight spaces. You can direct the back cast or forward cast with an underhand stroke to make the loop unroll from below to miss overhanging trees. Likewise, the forward stroke can place the fly into tree-lined banks, boat docks, or skip flies under obstructions. Fish like to think of those places as home.
- More options for changing directions. You can sculpt the oval to change casting directions by as much as 90 degrees. You can scoop back from the pick-up in front around the oval and back into the forward delivery to the left or the right of you. Likewise, from a pick-up point on one side, you can bring the line around to head straight out. This beats a series of false casts for efficiency, stealth, and exposure to wind and trees.
- Making slack-line presentation casts. Putting slack in the delivery (aerial mending) to let the fly drift freely or purposely curving the right, left, or to tuck straight down requires an elevated forward stroke to give you time to create these gyrations. You can use a spiral climb of the basic oval cast to set up for these maneuvers.

- Helping beginning casters. The oval cast is good for helping new fly casters get the feeling of the rod as it bends under line pressure and unbends to launch the loop. The complications of timing a pause and reconnecting between every stroke sometimes get in the way of feeling the rod/line at work. My granddaughters started fly casting with the oval cast, by making circles with the line on their practice rods and flipping the yard fly to cardboard fish profiles. They saw it as play. Famous fishing author A.J. McClane (1953) observed about oval casting that: “Straight back and forth casting is difficult to master, and there is some question in my mind whether this “classic” style isn’t an impractical standard to set for the beginner”.
- Having fun. The freedom to explore taking the rod and line in different angles and planes and getting the tactile feedback of staying connected are parts of our natural attraction to fly casting. The experience of one motion flowing into another and out to the fish seems to catch what we thought fly casting was about. It makes each cast seem a little more personal, a little less mechanical. Oval is like writing in cursive, striving for penmanship in each turn.

A Tool—*Not* a Cure-all

No, this is not a pitch for the casting equivalent of the miracle vacuum cleaner. Oval casting doesn’t work for everyone and every situation. You have to practice the moves, apply them in fishing conditions, and decide for yourself what works. Casting ovals may look cool, but they only happen if you closely control the stroke. Oval casting is more of a style of casting than a whole new cast. All the principles of casting and the demand for discipline still apply. You still have to form a loop and make it travel.

- Continuous tension comes from continuous attention. The oval cast is not a license for your wrist to run free. The shoulder, elbow, wrist, and hand must be educated and synchronized to lead the rod and line through a prescribed path without flips, flops, wiggles, or sudden gyrations.
- The term “constant tension” suggests keeping the tension the same throughout the stroke. A better term would be continuous (without a break) tension because, as in traditional casting you still have to smoothly speed up to keep the rod bending and then rapidly decelerate (or stop) to launch the rolling face of the loop from the rod tip. Continuous tension gives you a base from which to accelerate with using a lot of your energy straightening out slack.
- You have to be smooth, especially in the turnaround. The back cast casting loop forms as you are reversing in a “curving power snap” in the words of famous fly caster Joan Wulff (1987). The connection continues as you complete the back cast and turn it into the forward cast on the reversal.
- The oval cast does not free you from timing discipline. You are finishing, turning, and setting up the forward stroke in a second. Creeping forward too early out of the back cast shortens the effective (rod-bending) length of the stroke – traditional or oval style.
- You may experience some awkward moments in your transition to ovals. You will probably rush it at first. The hard-won habits of stop and wait style and may haunt you until you learn to trust

your tactile senses and teamwork with your eyes. You may tend to squeeze your hand or snap your wrist and it will show up immediately in the line and in the momentary loss of tension

- The oval path is best performed using little wrist movement through most of the stroke until you make the U-turn. Even then, make only limited and deliberate rotation to help flow through the turnaround. The wrist is more of a guide than a power source. A two-inch movement is amplified by 2 feet or more at the rod tip. All strokes should come a close, solid connection to your body as a stabilizer for controlled work by the shoulder and elbow joints. No outstretched arms waving around out to your side.
- Your accuracy may improve with the continuous tension cast. However, issues can arise if you shortchange your eye contact with the target as you turn and watch the back loop circling. Establish eye contact solidly with the target as you lift the line off the water. This makes it easier to find that groove again as the back cast comes around. Issues can also arise if the oval movement doesn't return to quickly align the forward stroke to the target. Not bringing the back cast loop far enough around before the reversal and/or not making a complete U-turn will send the forward cast in an unwanted diagonal in front of you and the fly lands left of the target. If the back cast part of the oval or the U-turn rotates too far, the opposite diagonal takes the fly to the right of the target. Either of these misalignments wastes precious casting energy. Once the loop is headed out, it is usually too late to realign, and you must recast. Avoid or correct these issues by practicing along a straight line on the grass. You will quickly learn to minimize unnecessarily wide or incomplete ovals and to position the U-turn to merge into the forward stroke looking straight at the target.
- Oval casts may be less energy-efficient than traditional casts for the same reasons that big overhead casting loops don't travel as efficiently as narrow loops. You can conserve energy by reducing the width of the separation, using only as much line as you need, keeping the stroke close to the body, and compensating by using the haul to speed up the line and help tighten the loop. (See below)
- Oval casts can twist the line and, in some cases, loosen the ferrules, especially on multi-piece rods. You might have to check for these issues regularly.

Part 2: How To, Tips & Watch Outs

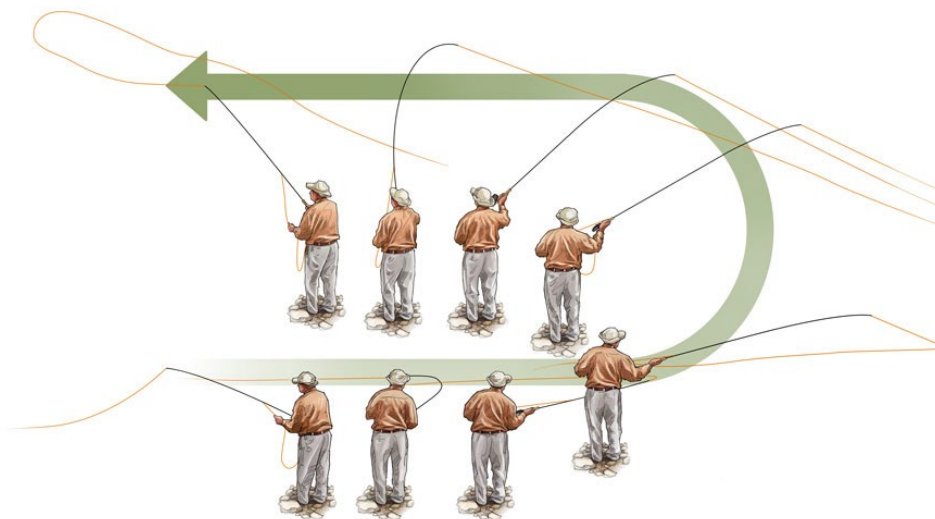
Getting in Touch

First a little warm-up to start learning basic movements and developing sensitivity to the line under tension.

- Start by moving the rod with 10 feet or less of line outside the tip in a circle in front of you. (If possible, use a rod that bends easily; line tension is harder to detect with stiff, fast-action rods, especially with so little line out of the tip.)
- Watch the connection between the rod tip and the line. Concentrate on what it feels like when the rod bends and the line tightens to follow it. Make bigger circles, then smaller ones, slow circles then faster ones, clockwise then counterclockwise. Now move the rod to circles back and forward in different planes - vertical, tilted right or left, diagonally over the opposite shoulder, in a figure eight, and back and forth. Never lose the tension. And as experienced oval casters say: *"If it ain't tight, it ain't right."*
- Now speed up the line and feel how the pressure in your hand increases in your hand. Notice how much easier it is to feel the tension when you use your whole arm with very little bending of your wrist. You can easily lose the subtle pressure if you break or flop the wrist too much. Note too how the feeling goes away when you make jerky movements. In the oval casting game as in traditional casting, smoothness comes before speed.
- Stretch the circle into an oval shape, aimed back and front as in a cast. Do not stop the rod, even though your traditional stroke's muscle memory may prompt you to do so. Note that the fly line stays tight and telegraphs pressure all around the "racetrack" path. Close your eyes and keep moving.
- Create another oval and this time make snappy quarter circles with limited twists of your wrist at the opposite ends of the oval. You'll learn to work that wrist-assisted turnaround into your overall cast as you practice.
- Now stop the rod crisply. Feel the rod unload and launch the loop in the direction the tip was pointed. Get a feel for how the loop behaves when you stop the rod for a fraction of a second or even when you just sharply slow it down for a millisecond and then keep on moving.

How to do a Basic Oval Cast

These directions are for a right-handed caster. Do the following sequence with the rod hand only. Put the other hand to your side or in your pocket. You will add the line hand into the cast after your rod hand gets comfortable with the movement. Start with your rod tip straight out in front of you with the tip low and the line on the grass or water with all slack removed.



1. Grip the rod with the thumb or index finger on top and then rotate your wrist outward about a quarter turn (90 degrees), turning the guides inward and reel flat in front of you. (Note: you are not making the cast with the wrist but with the whole arm. The wrist is partially rotated here so it can help you turn the cast around in step 4.)
2. Keeping the elbow of the rod arm close to the body, lift the line slowly and smoothly off the water.
3. When the line is free of the water, sweep the rod back, keeping the thumb in a “hitch-hiker” position starting from a horizontal plane (wrist still rotated out) but immediately shifting to a climbing, curved path that creates in a large high circle beside and behind you. The line climbs as it follows the rod tip and will probably pass under it as the rod curves back and around to complete the circle behind you. Keep the back stroke moving to avoid losing any of the stretch in the line and the pressure you feel through your hand and forearm. Do not stop or jerk the rod which will show up as wiggles or waves in the line.

4. As the loop, line and leader start to unroll as you reach the end of the circle, raise your hand and turn your wrist in an inward “C” to bring the rod back to face straight to the target in a vertical “thumbs-up” position. This has reversed the rod to be pointing forward now, climbing, and straight.
5. Smoothly accelerate the rod and then stop it in the direction of the target - just as you would in a traditional forward cast – to form the loop.
6. Lower the rod tip back to the water by following the line down after the loop is completely unrolled.

Oval Variations

Congratulations. You have just made an oval cast. You have combined the backward and forward movements into a smooth sweep up one rung of a spiral staircase, with the line flowing back horizontally then up around the step rising toward the next to the target. The rounded reversal is a continuous movement which can be made narrower with less separation of planes, by accelerating and tightening the turn during the wrist rotation. You may have to slow (not stop) to negotiate the turn, but you will recover speed quickly as you realign with the target, as long as you don't lose line tension. Your traditional forward stroke muscle memory takes over and finishes the delivery.

This basic oval allows you to start the back phase low but spiral it into a high trajectory forward phase to catch the wind or to stop the rod high enough to reposition slack on the water as you lower the rod tip. Maneuvers like these would be more difficult with distinct (back and forward) strokes separated by a pause.

From the bird's eye view, the oval cast creates a tear-drop shaped pattern. This can be narrowed or widened by rotating your wrist less or more in the set up for the cast and/or tightening or extending your casting arm away from the body, respectively. These changes will allow you to conform the back cast path to the available space. You will also learn to vary tilt of the turn to set up for a lower or higher forward path.

The forward stroke does not have to travel straight out in front of you. You might want to reach a target out and across from you. You can create an oval that travels from your casting side over your head to the left of you, changing directions in one movement rather than a series of false casts. Or you can bring the back stroke from the left of you over your off-side shoulder to come forward on your casting side. Lots of possibilities.

Because you are staying connected to the line in motion with no distinct stop-and-pause, you can extend your arm both back and forward at the end of the stroke and still feel the rod and line. This “follow through” (in front) and “drift” (in back) are done in traditional casting strokes to give the caster more room to execute the opposite stroke and to avoid tailing loops and tangles in throwing long distances and/or big flies. This lengthening of the rod tip travel is important in compensating for how much the rod bending under the weight of line and stubbornly heavy rig. The more resistant the fly or

wind conditions or the longer you have to cast, the farther the rod tip needs to travel to spread out the bending of the rod. These extensions can be made more smoothly and precisely in the oval cast.

Bringing in the Line Hand

Integrating the line hand can be a little tricky. You can use the line hand to help keep continuous tension, but not if you yank, release, or drop the line randomly. You must move the line hand in concert with the rod hand, feeling the line and making sure that both hands send the same signals to the rod tip. With a little practice, your two hands will learn to flow together, and you will be making smooth, curving loops and U-turns.

Hauling – pulling with the line hand during a stroke to speed up the line- is just as important in the oval cast as it is with the traditional cast. If done correctly, the haul not only increases line speed, but can also stabilize and smooth the tension to create a graceful and sleek loop oval path. You can haul on both the back and forward strokes, but your line hand must maintain continuous contact with the line, especially as it comes into and around the U-turn. The steadiness and timing of pulling and feeding the line back through the guides are important. As in traditional casting, the line and rod hand must move together to create long smooth pulls. Short, bouncing, or jerking pulls destroy the smoothness you are trying to achieve, leaving shock waves and wiggles.

Get the feel of rod-hand movement before trying the haul. Then introduce single hauls slowly into the back and forward strokes with the rod in the sidearm plane so you can watch and feel the effect of your line hand. Feel how the pulling increases the tension in the rod and how the rod tries to unbend as soon as you it slows down. Practice the timing of the pull and the follow back, learning to avoid jerky movements that interfere with the turning movement. Try to keep your line hand connected through the entire cast through the “O” ring and pinch grip with thumb against forefinger, like the “OK” hand gesture. This allows you to guide the line back and forth through the rod guides or slow or stop it without dropping the line to the water or boat bottom.

Tips & Watch Outs

- Be a smooth operator. No need for Zumba classes, but you can combine the open stance – left foot forward - with a gentle, limited twisting or rocking of the body to keep the oval flowing smoothly and extending your stroke.
- Keep the casting movement close to your body to reinforce the smoothness and channel the turnaround. The oval path must be as precise and economical as the traditional casting stroke. No erratic hand and wrist jibe or outstretched arms.
- For the forward stroke, stay closer to a vertical plane to keep your rod hand aligned straight from your eye to the target.
- Don't overdo the turning motion. As on a real racetrack, you can under- or over-steer the turns and spin out if you don't synchronize the wheel and the accelerator. Make very restricted rotary

movements with the wrist – a quarter turn at most to help the back cast turn around to the more vertical plane. Watch the back cast loop to make sure things get lined up for the reversal. You will feel the difference as the sideways pressure on the tip shifts into a pull from the back. Then start forward.

- A turnaround too early will set up the forward stroke to take a diagonal path to the left of your target. A late turnaround will head the forward stroke diagonally to the right. Accuracy suffers and cast is robbed of energy if you have to fight to correct the alignment in the forward stroke. Make the turnaround (U-turn) end right where you want to start forward, straight back from the target with thumb up, sighting the target.

Give Oval Casts a Try

The oval cast should not replace the traditional casting style. It does extend the conditions in which you can cast more comfortably and couples with the traditional overhead style makes you a more versatile angler. Separate planes and continuous tension let you deal with big and/or heavy rigs, wind, back cast obstructions, irregular casting positions. You can easily combine oval and traditional strokes even in a single cast, for example using a back cast oval to change directions and then move into a traditional false casting sequence to get the distance right for landing the fly.

Learning the oval cast will not confound your traditional overhead casting skills. It may improve them by putting you more in touch with the rod/line tension and giving you moves you can combine with the traditional approach. You may already be casting in slightly different planes. A.J. McClane pointed out that from a “bird’s eye view”, most casters naturally “operate with a slight rotary motion with the back cast tipped off-vertical and the forward cast coming into a full vertical plane with a very slight twist of the wrist.” Oval casting skills give you more options for being more deliberate and creative, painting strokes to shape the cast for the situation.

Oval casting teaches you to slow down, smooth the stroke, and stay connected – traits that serve well in navigating traditional casts to fight the wind or bore in on a target in tight or complex surroundings. The oval encourages a longer and fluid motion which can be therapeutic for a choppy or punchy casting style plagued with tailing loops and fatigue. And you tend to false cast less because you have more options for changing the casting direction and trajectory.

“The concept of the oval cast will...
enable you to gain control for a broad range of stream conditions”

Mac Brown—Casting Angles - 1997

And you may be in good company. Watch closely some of the videos of the late Lefty Kreh who integrated oval casting into his famous casting style. It allowed him to master the demands of casting in big, rough and tumble environments - freshwater and salt. His rod tip path is a very slim oval when viewed from above. The casting planes are separated by a “frog’s hair” as Lefty might say. The launch of the back and forward loops is so quick and so closely integrated with a follow through and turnaround that the elements of the cast blend together in a single motion. Is it an oval cast? Is it a traditional cast? Does it really matter what you call it? It is art, born of practicality. Now may be the time for you to adopt a new brush stroke and create your own art.

Be well, and well-rounded in your casting journey.

Dave Cleaves

Some video resources

- [Pete Kutzer – Orvis – How to Make a Belgian Cast](#)
- [Gunnar Brammer – Fly Casting Blog – Belgium Cast, Stopping the Rod, Using Your Wrist](#)
- [Tim Rajeff - Heavy Fly Casting](#)
- [David Ebanks – Review of the DVD “Taming the Wind” by Prescott Smith](#)

Other resources

- Gary Borger, 1995: Presentation. pp 217-218. Elliptical Casts
- Mac Brown, 1997: Casting Angles. pp 164-169. Elliptical Style Casting
- Mel Kreiger, 1987: The Essence of Flycasting. pp 104-107
The Belgian Cast (great photo sequence)
- [Lefty Kreh & Ed Jaworowski. Smooth Operators of the Complete Cast. Fly Fisherman Magazine. February/March 2016](#)
- [Joe Mahler – Tips for Effectively Casting in the Wind](#) • <https://www.joemahler.com/>
- A.J. McClane. 1953. The Practical Fly Fisherman. pp 158-174. How to Cast Beyond Sixty Feet
- Joan Wulff, 1987: Joan Wulff’s Fly Casting Techniques. pp 129-136. Curving Power Snaps

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