

Advice from a Pro

In a recent SVTU chapter meeting, Tom Martin, well-known guide, and owner of [Heavy Water Anglers](#) gave an excellent talk on streamer fishing. He also told us that from a casting standpoint, being able to make cross-body casts is important, given the variety of obstacles and safety concerns that arise on the casting side, whether fishing from boats or wading.

Great advice. Let's see what it takes to cast on the opposite or offside of your body—left side for right-handed casters and vice versa. You may open up casting opportunities and enjoy your next trip with Tom, other guides, and friends even more fully.

Offside casts are also called the cross-body, over-the-shoulder, backhand, and other names. They also have some rather unflattering names given to them by unprepared anglers. Offside casts are normal casting strokes performed in different planes than your regular overhead cast. The objective is to avoid barriers on your right—or reach targets otherwise unavailable by moving the rod tip along the left side of your body. You still use your dominant hand and do not shift to another casting position, by casting across your body or off your non-dominant shoulder. With these adjustments, you can tackle some difficult situations and keep yourself and the friends, family, or guide on your right side safe and more relaxed. No hard hats needed.

There are other techniques for getting the fly to your left such as spey casts, oval casts, and curve casts, but they involve line flying on your right side. You can also learn to cast with your non-dominant hand, a useful skill that takes some retraining of both your right and left hands to reverse their roles. We will address these options in future columns.

Two Moves—Many Situations

There are two basic offside-cast moves. The cross-body cast brings the rod back to stop at your chest before reversing into the forward stroke. The over-the-shoulder move, also called the off-shoulder tilt brings the rod over your head and opposite shoulder by raising the elbow and tilting the rod to put the rod tip path on the other side. Click [here](#) to watch Orvis's instructor Pete Kutzer demonstrate offside casting in dealing with a sidewind.

Here are some situations for offside casts:

- **Boats**—You are trying to cast out in front and/or your right. But the path of the line could strafe and maybe collide with other passengers. Not a safe move, especially if the flies are heavy or pushed around by the wind. Joe Mahler, Florida guide, casting instructor, and illustrator calls this hazard set the "[No-Fly-Zone](#)".
- **Wading**—Bank-side trees, brush, and other hungry vegetation walls you in on your right. Deep or treacherous water out to your left prohibits wading out and away.
- **Wind**—blowing into your casting side, slapping your body, or pushing the cast off-track to the target. See another excellent article in the digital Fly Fisherman magazine on casting in the wind by [Joe Mahler](#).

- **Fish rising or cruising**—off to your left, reachable only by changing your position and/or making multiple false casts that could spook them down or off to parts unknown. Sometimes fish can tell you are a right-hander and work left just to aggravate you.

During a day of fishing, you may be confronted with these and other challenges that could shrink your casting options. They may require that you cast offside—maybe for extended periods, without tiring or losing your accuracy—while dealing with other demons like rocking boats, changing winds, or weighted and unwieldy rigs.

Practicing offside casting moves can prepare you to toggle more freely between different casting situations. You can expand the zone in time and space that is effectively “castable”. And you can enjoy the fishing experience inside this zone with safer and more relaxed casting, more ease in handling winds, and less body turning, shifting, false casting.

A side-benefit of improving your offside cast is improvement in your basic casting stroke on either side—specifically in backcast form and forward cast accuracy. The offside moves set up the chest and opposite shoulder as effective body blocks that prompt your hand to stop the rod cleanly on the backstroke, giving you a tighter, more efficient loop. And on the forward stroke, because your right hand more is more tightly aligned to the eye to target line, you may become more accurate. Some of my casting students, after experiencing these improvements, have adopted a more vertical (i.e., closer to offside) casting style in their regular onside stroke.

How to do an Offside Cast

Compare the two moves with the front-view illustrations shown below.

**Illustrations courtesy of Joe Mahler
(joemahler.com)**

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Cross-Body Offside



Over-the-Shoulder Offside

Cross-Body Cast

1. Start with your rod **straight out in front of you**, the tip low to the grass or water with all slack removed.
2. Make a normal inside pick-up/lay-down cast with your right (dominant) hand. Pickup (*Lift*) • Backcast (*Back*) • Forward cast (*Out*) • Lower (*to the water*). **Get in touch with how the cast feels and looks.** Imagine the rod path slanting straight through a clockface at about 10 o'clock. For a visual reference of what is described above, read this overview on [Pick-up and lay-down](#).
3. **Now go offside.** Make a backcast by lifting and bringing your hand to your left cheek, moving straight back, and stopping the stroke as it almost touches your chest. Think: “Cross your heart...and hope to cast”.
4. Wait for the **backcast to almost unroll**, then stroke forward so that the rod tip and following line pass on your left. Accelerate to a stop, then lower the rod to the water after the front loop unrolls.

Note: This cross-body move is best used for shorter casts—out to 40 feet—because your body impedes longer strokes needed for distance and cramps the line hand space that may be needed for longer casts. It also tends to be less accurate because the rod is somewhat left of the eye and below the target line. Cross-body moves can be made more quickly, do not require lifting the elbow, and may be better suited to lower offside trajectories.

Tips

- **Move your back and forward strokes in a straight path from and to the target.** Resist the tendency to curve to the right on the forward stroke as if it wants to find its inside home.
- Establish a straightforward groove by watching your hand wrapped on the rod butt as it moves to you on the backcast and out from you on the forward stroke. If you see the rim of the reel starting to peek out from the either side of the hand, the rod is starting to curve, warning you to pull it back into a straighter path.
- **Use your entire arm**—upper arm and forearm—not just your wrist to lift the backcast into place and deliver the forward cast. Use these larger muscles to spread out the effort and provide stability. Avoid the turning and wobbling that comes with lack of wrist control. Wristing encourages rounding, and you need to stay on the straight and narrow.
- Don't extend your arm way over to the offside or wave it in the air above you. The farther your casting hand moves from you, the harder it is to achieve that straight rod path.
- Keep the rod coming back to you at about the chin level; do not allow it to drop below or climb so high that the rod hits your face or blocks your vision.

Over-the-Shoulder Cast

Start with step 3. This time, form the backcast by raising the casting elbow and bringing the backcast to a stop over your head. Then pull the rod forward so that the rod tip traces an imaginary line along your left side. Think of it as combing your hair back, pausing, and then combing forward toward the target. People with hair can relate to that analogy. I can only imagine.

Note: The over-the-shoulder is the more versatile of the two offside casting moves. It gives you more freedom to make longer strokes higher off the water for longer casts. It also allows you more room to work the line hand on your left and to combine the move with other casting moves such as roll casts, [oval casting](#), curve casts, and aerial mends that require higher stops to give you more time to develop and lower good slack to the water. By raising the elbow and leaning left at the same time, you can extend the rod tip path more deeply on the left side.

Tips:

- **Tilt from the shoulder and elbow joints**, not the wrist. Wrists like to rotate and wobble and can be hard to discipline. A floppy wrist can break the sensory communication between the hand and the forearm and make it difficult to control the rod path. And they get tired.
- **Don't tilt the rod too far inward.** After about 10 o'clock from vertical, the elbow will be rising too high above your forearm and the rod tip path angled too low on your offside. At 9 o'clock the elbow is above the forearm. This is too weak and fragile a position to support hundreds of casts and could aggravate any shoulder or neck conditions you may have.
- **Try to stay in touch with the upper arm and shoulder muscles that stabilize and help keep your stroke smooth.** Keep the elbow below the line of the shoulder and venture from body for only the tilt needed. That long rod will put the line where it needs to be, even with a modest elbow raise. If you need more room, tilt your neck and/or your upper body to left to assist the elbow.

Using the Line Hand

- Your line hand has been doing its work from its offside position for a long time. It has managed slack control, stripping, shooting, hauling, striking, and fish wrestling by traveling over to the center of your body, into the onside or just "working from home". The line hand serves the same functions in offside casts, but now the rod hand has come to meet the line hand. Some line hand functions may get easier, but you still must move both hands in concert through the back and forward strokes.
- You must keep the rod either below or above your eyes so you can see the target, Pantomime cross-body and over-the-shoulder moves, touching the index fingers of both hands together to see and feel the movements. You may have to adjust your line hand work, perhaps pulling more away and parallel to the rod than down and/or shortening your pulls to deal with the rod's closeness.

- The over-the-shoulder seems to be an easier move to coordinate with the line hand because you have more line hand room and more stroke space to make everything work. With practice, you will get the hang of it. You will be rewarded with the feel of hauling and shooting line over your shoulder into territory you previously would have passed up.

Final Tips for Your Trip... Into the Offside

- Shift your stance to put your right foot forward. This opens casting space on your left side and makes it easier to make longer strokes.
- Pick the line up off the water smoothly while the line is on your left side, so you come straight back from the target. Don't jerk the line off the water and lose contact as the rod starts to flex. This is sometimes where the right hand out of habit escapes and heads back home on the onside.
- Keep the casting movement close to your body, with the hand moving just above your head, not stretched high above it. If you want to extend the rod tip travel more to the left, tilt your body a little more that way.
- Keep your hand and rod from blocking your vision to the target. Raise the cross-body move or lower the over-the-shoulder move to balance casting comfort with maintaining a clear line of sight.

Watch Outs

- Don't push through physical limitations in your shoulders or neck.
 - Find out through easy practice session just how far you can comfortably reach or tilt toward your opposite shoulder.
 - For the shorter offside casts, use the cross-body rather than the over-the-head movement. As Tom Martin told us, his clients catch lots of big fish – trout, smallmouth, and muskies – very close to boat.
- Offside casting will seem awkward at first and at times tiring
 - Alternate sets of offside and onside casts to give each side welcome breaks
 - Rely more on clean, slow pickups and shooting line to avoid excessive false casting and unnecessary strokes
 - Practice the moves looking in a mirror to find the straightest and more comfortable hand paths. If you are planning an extended trip with lots of casting in onside-restricted situations, start some resistance exercises with light dumbbells or a resistance bands for shoulders, arms, and wrist stability. Prepare your muscles for exploring in this new casting territory.

Give Offside Casting a Try

These stroke adjustments can help you cast more comfortably and safely, keep you out of your boatmates' hair, and help you deal with right banks, bushes, and blustery crosswinds. Work through the newness of it all. If anybody asks, you are just following your guide's advice.

Written Resources

- [Excerpt from Fly Casting Finesse](#) by John Field's on the Sexyloops website. 2015
- Jeff Wagner. [Casting Light on Substance and Style](#). on situational casting adjustments. Fly Fusion website
- Joe Mahler on [how to keep your flies out of your friend's face](#). Fly Fisherman Magazine. 2015
- [Joe Mahler – Tips for Effectively Casting in the Wind](#). See the "Sidewind (Casting Side) description and graphic.

Videos

- [Pete Kutzer \(Orvis\)](#) demonstrating offside casting in dealing with a sidewind
- [Tim Rajeff on off-shoulder cast](#) – longer strokes over the opposite shoulder
- Jim Dowd of Zoar Outdoor on ExpertVillage.com. [Over the Shoulder casting](#)
- Nelson Ishiyama of Henry's Fork Lodge on [dealing with wind from your casting-hand side](#)
- Deneki Outdoors Inc. guides on the [off-the-shoulder cast](#)

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