

### Keep, or start practicing—don't let winter stand in your way

- Keep from getting rusty by maintaining regular contact with the fly rod
- Maintain creature comfort—cozier casting and avoid freezing your rod butt off
- Work on specific improvements or “rough” spots—following up on “I ought to work on that” refrain
- Embed good habits—getting in the good repetitions (reps)
- Accumulate reps based on concentration, feedback, and rapid correction to build muscle memory
- Practice free of the distraction of fishing (your payback comes in the spring)
- Reflect on the summer's fresh fishing experiences and any impetus it created for casting improvements or new skills
- An antidote for cabin fever and a reasonable alternative to home repair and other questionable practices
- Find a bunker for practice privacy—avoiding the summer's “Catching Anything Yet?” standard neighbor salutation as they stroll by. (If you practice outside in the winter, they will know you are crazy and not bother you out of pity.). Experiment with new casting moves in private indoors and discover better ways to meet fish.

### Where to start?

Look back at the past spring and summer's fishing experiences. Any improvements in casting you want to make? Any new movements you want to learn?

- Slow down and/or smooth out your basic stroke?
- Try a new grip?
- Improve accuracy?
- Learn to haul better?
- Improve roll casting?
- Try Spey casting moves?
- Reduce the number of false casts needed?
- Expand the variety of presentation techniques?
- Cast in different planes – vertical, sidearm, oval, other?
- Better handle loose line?
- And so on
- Make a practice plan

- Break down your stroke into component movements, pick the ones most important to improve, and work on one or two in each practice session.
- Set measurable objectives and design a drill for each move.
- See the suggestions in the [Practicing with Purpose article](#) in the Adaptive Casting section of the SVTU website.
- Call or email Dave Cleaves for help in setting up a program – it's a free service of the Fly Fishers International (FFI) Casting Education Program.

## Indoor Practice

### Practice rods

Use a short practice rod with yarn or cord as a line substitute. They have no reel. Many rod manufacturers offer these rods. Check some out below. The shortness of the rod allows you to see and feel your body movements, the line response, and the target work together. Find a rod and line outfit based on its similarity in feel to casting a real rod; length compared to your ceiling height; ease in loading; responsiveness; and visibility of its line in motion. Prices range from \$30 to \$70.

- Practice rods don't cast themselves; they make you work at it, but they can help you become a more graceful and stealthy caster.
- Note: These are great resources for introducing children and beginner adults to the joys of fly casting. They may help in getting other members of your family started.
  - [Echo Micro-Practice rod](#)
  - [TFO Office Rod](#)
  - [Reddington Form Game](#) rod
  - [Orvis Practi-Caster](#) rod
  - [Wulff Fly-O practice rod](#)
  - [Scientific Anglers Groove practice rod](#)
- Alternatively, use a rod tip section with old fly line, parachute cord, or heavy yarn strung from the top and attached at the bottom guide. These DIY rigs often cast faster and land with higher impact than the commercial practice rods. NOTE: Not for use around the family China or shelf do-dads. You could be sent outside with your indoor practice privileges revoked.

### Using props and aids

- Pantomime with a rod butt section, dowel, hairbrush, spatula (flat head detects twists and wobbles) and other aides without line.
- Use a long rubber band attached to the first guide of your real rod's butt section to practice the hauling pull-and-follow back motions under tension.
- Use loose fly line without the rod to practice precise line handling and pulling motions in the haul.
- Turn a laser pointer into a surrogate rod tip. Use the feedback from the behavior of the red dot to straighten line paths, smooth out acceleration, and sharpen and tighten the rod stop to points on the ceiling. Lasers don't lie. They can help you develop precision in your stroke. Just don't point them at people and pets.

### Set up a practice “place”

- Use the tightness of the setting—basement, garage, hallway, or other—to advantage
  - Purposely constrict the casting motion – many casting problems come from arm, forearm, wrist, and hand motions that lose discipline in the wide-open casting field or on the water. Time to realign your basic stroke with “cubical casting” or space shuttle false casting routines.
  - Practice from a chair or sitting on the floor to block lower body movement and to focus on the arm, wrist, hand skills. Think of casting from a boat or kayak, crawling up a small stream, or casting from a deep wading situation.
- Use the quiet of the indoor setting to concentrate on each cast. Combine meditation and memorization to create high-quality repetitions. Remove the distractions. Except of course for the family cat who can become a great moving target (for yarn only) and may readily strike the yarn at the end of the practice line. A cheap thrill to bide time until the next real fishing trip.
- Always cast to targets. Use brightly colored golf balls or mini cones. Scatter them around to set up different distances and place some in difficult settings with things you must cast over, under, around, or through. Set up current flow simulations with hand-drawn arrows on paper to set up context for mending. Be creative and diabolical.
- Use indoor features to represent fishing obstacles – corners (curve casts), ceiling fans (anti-tree back casting), chairs (side armed underslung casts and tight loops), carpets (roll cast set ups), doorways (width and height accuracy), wastebaskets for targets. Remember the horrors of the Zombie limbs and prepare to get sneaky.

### Use visual feedback

- Take advantage of sources of visual feedback – Use mirrors or reflections from windows or your own shadows to check out your movements from the side, straight in front on to check the alignment and tracking, and from behind to see the back cast.

- Shoot video and analyze sets of casts. Use a cell phone or tablet in selfie mode on a tripod. Enlist a partner or child/grandchild to video you if only to give them something to chide you about. Use a gridded or patterned background to help navigate the recordings and encourage precision in improving hand and rod movement. Track the gripping and hand dynamics, too.
- Practice strokes to mimic instructional videos and You-Tube sessions in real time
- Access [the FFI Learning Center](#), Orvis, and other sources
- See the [video suggestions in the SVTU website Adaptive Caster](#) section designed to prepare participants for the [FFI casting skills development challenge](#).

### Make it fun!

- Set up a competition with yourself or other members of the family. Set up points for success in accuracy, keep score, and track improvements over time.

### Outdoor Practice—Play the Forecast

- Alternate with indoor practice as the weather allows. Pick an issue, work on it inside with the practice rod, try it with the full-size outfit the next nice day; take the lessons learned and refinement plans indoors with the practice rod, then back outdoors; and on and on.
- Take advantage of warmer, calmer days – keep the rod/line/yarn fly assembled, ready to go without hassle and lost time.
- Wear fingerless wool gloves over thin latex gloves to keep fingers warmer and drier.
- Use handwarmers – electric or chemical.
- Don't let the line coil and stiffen in lower temperatures
- Keep your line stretched by pulling and holding segments for a few seconds around your bent knees.
- Have a plan to make the best use of the day and every minute.
- Keep the practice short – 15 minutes or so.
- Don't overdo the session with too many objectives and a marathon effort. Your attention span and practice effectiveness will decay rapidly as you experience discomfort. That's when the bad reps start to creep in. Stop before things fall apart. Shivering is not a family value in casting practice.

### How to Practice—Rules for Practicing Perfectly

#### Getting and Staying in Casting Shape

- Planning to fish for new different species or in unfamiliar settings and/or heavier equipment can require some work to ready the muscles.
- Bad casting form and lack of strength and flexibility can create, worsen, or prolong injuries. Winter is a good time to correct form and develop balance and stability.
- Include supplemental physical exercises to increase your ability to control the rod. Work for improving control, not increasing power. Always get advice and approval from your doctor or physical therapist before you start an exercise routine.
  - Work the exercise movements through a variety of angles to prepare for a full range of casting situations.
  - Focus on improving flexibility in the shoulder, elbow, wrist, and hands and fingers.
  - Pantomime casting moves with a heavier rod, a wooden dowel, or a wine bottle, moving very slowly. Practice starting, moving, accelerating, stopping, and following through (drifting) the movement along a straight line. Check out the classic “bottle method” described in the classic [“A Fly Fisher’s Life” \(1959\) by Charles Ritz](#) (page 35). (Note: Finding the perfect wine bottle for this use is an important step. Experiment widely with different brands and shapes of bottles. Empty the bottles first ... a winter bonus but somebody has to do it.)
  - Strengthen the forearm, wrist and hand with light dumbbells or resistance bands. The bands allow you to extend the casting movement against resistance and gain control and stroke length. Their resistance increases as you stretch the band which resembles how a fly rod/line behaves as it loads. You can stretch a band from elevated anchors such as a doorknob or jam to create resistance along paths of different directions. This makes them more versatile than free weights which mostly limit you to resistance against the downward pull of gravity.
  - Squeeze a small rubber ball or pinch grip and hold a thick book or a small free weight plate to strengthen fingers and thumb. Hold progressively longer to build your ability to “clutch-stop” the rod to launch the loop. Start reading and pinching bigger books to get ready for that 9 weight bass, or 10 weight tarpon rod.

If it snows—use high-viz range orange or yellow line. It is beyond cool as it unrolls over the white surface. Let me know how your winter practice works out.

## Resources

[Seneca Valley TU – Adaptive Caster series](#)

Fly Fishers International Learning Center – Casting

- [Fundamentals of Fly Casting - Loops](#)
- [Pick-Up/Lay-Down Cast](#)
- [False Casting](#)
- [Change-of-Direction Casts](#)
- [Roll Cast](#)

Fly Casting Clinics and Educational Programs

- [Antietam Fly Anglers](#) (MD)
- [Tidal Potomac Fly Rodders](#) (DC metro)
- [Goose Creek Casting Club](#) (VA)
- [Potomac Valley Fly Fishers](#) (MD)
- [Seneca Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited](#). (MD)

Quick links

- [Quick links to Fly Shops, Conservation, and Fishing Groups](#)

Conferences and Shows

- [Lancaster, PA Fly Show, March 2 & 3 2024](#)
- [Virginia Fly Fishing and Wine Festival, January 13 & 14, 2024](#)

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