

THE CASTING CLINIC

With Al Kyte

GRIP AND STANCE



In an overhead cast, we all try to move the fly line back and forth along a straight path as effortlessly as possible. Yet each of us looks somewhat different as we do this. Some of these differences in individual casting styles can be traced back to what we learned first - how to stand and hold the rod.

Casting Grip

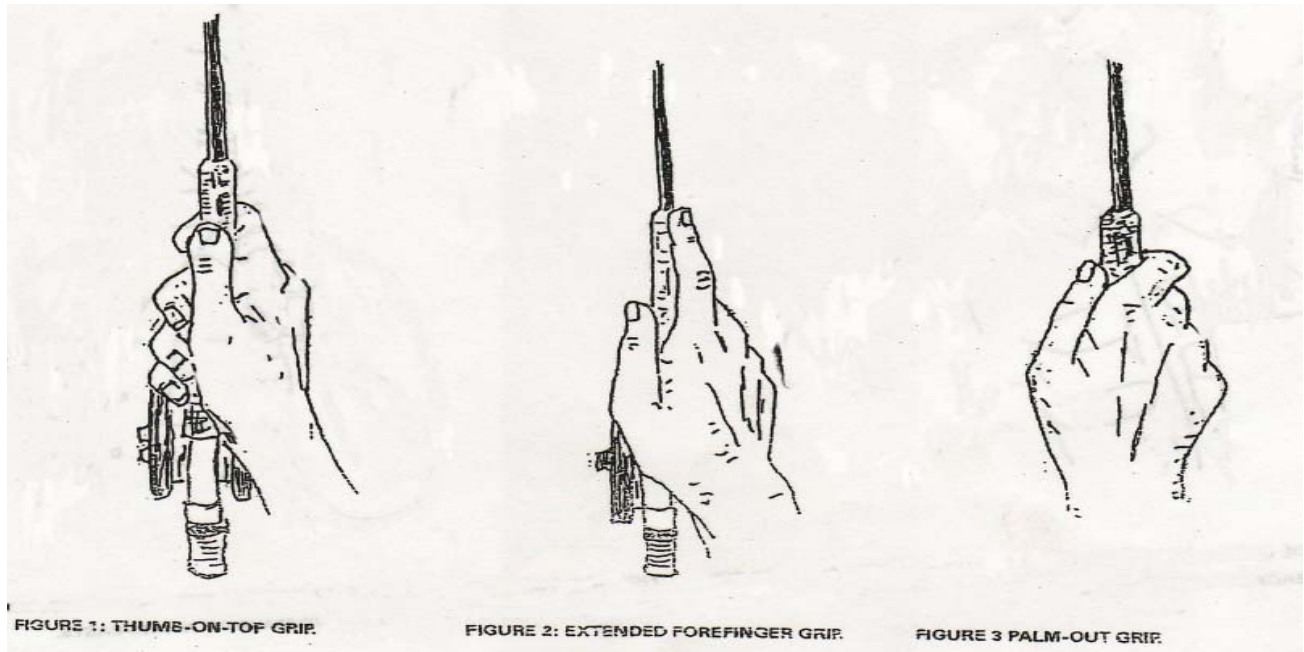
Why do fly fishers differ in the grips they recommend? Certainly, hand sizes vary, but beyond that, skilled anglers sometimes want different performance characteristics from their grips. For example, someone who fishes mostly small streams with short, delicate casts is likely to prefer a grip that enhances sensitivity - increased feel of the rod tip. Yet a fly fisher who fishes heavy rods and lines might look for a grip that provides the strength to force a bend into a stiff rod. When I evaluate grips, I focus mostly on this trade-off between sensitivity and strength. Comfort is also important, but seems to care of itself - people seldom continue to cast with a grip that feels uncomfortable.

Grips are typically pictured, described and taught with the reel on the underside of a fly rod that is pointed forward - as if you haven't yet made your first back cast. Thus a thumb-on-top grip (Figure 1) will typically be rotated upward during the back cast to provide thumb support behind the forward cast. However some of us also turn our hands outward during the back cast and may make the forward cast with the reel out to the side. This further complicates

the notion of grip, because the hand position during the cast is then different from the one taught to start the movements. Thus, those of us who rotate our hands outward may grasp the rod with the thumb on top, but make the forward cast with the thumb off to the side. The casting grip I analyze is the one that does the work - the hand position as we start the forward cast.

Some years ago, I taught fly casting to an orthopedic surgeon who specialized in the hand and arm. He sent me several medical articles that indicated, among other things, that three fingers - the middle, ring, and little fingers - together constitute the grasping fingers. How we add the index finger and thumb to the grasp depends on the purpose of the movement. If we want strength, the index finger and thumb usually are positioned close to the other fingers, often in a fistlike grip giving support behind the primary direction of movement, the forward cast. However, if we want to emphasize sensitivity of 'feel', we are more likely to extend the index finger and thumb to some extent.

I believe that most casting instructors in this country teach the thumb-on-top grip with the index finger slightly separated from the others, in the position of a trigger finger. Usually, the thumb does provide support behind the forward cast. Lefty Kreh uses the thumb as a directional guide in much of his instruction. I teach this grip to beginning students because I believe it provides the best balance of strength and sensitivity throughout a broad range of casting distances. Its primary advantage for me is versatility.



Yet as I observe my students casting, I have a few of them experiment with other grips. If, for example, I find a student applying excessive force, I suggest an extended forefinger grip for a more sensitive feel of the rod (Figure 2). Although extending the forefinger is generally regarded in the casting literature as a weak grip, Gary Borger, Bob Jacklin, and some exceptional European casters use versions of it to throw impressively long casts with trout-weight rods. Yet most of these casters, if not all, switch to a stronger grip when using heavier, stiffer rods. Advocates of the extended-forefinger grip claim another advantage, that of eliminating excessive 'wristiness' in students. I have found that this extended finger does indeed minimize wrist motion in some students.

There is some disagreement as to which is the strongest grip. One grip may bring stronger muscles into play, whereas another provides more rigid support from the hand. Over the years, two distance tournament casters, Tim Rajeff and Ed Mosser, have recommended to me a grip in which the knuckle of the index finger is rotated to the top of the rod. During the forward cast, the bones of the hand, rather than the thumb, then provide the support behind the rod (Figure 3). Mel Krieger has referred to this as the 'palm-out' grip. I find it is the only grip

that provides adequate support when my fingers have become cold and lost their gripping strength.

Some people cast with variations of these distinctive grips. Yet with any grip, it is possible to hold the rod too tightly. One guideline for checking this is to think of holding the rod as if holding a bird in the hand, tightly enough to keep it from escaping, but not so tight as to squeeze it.

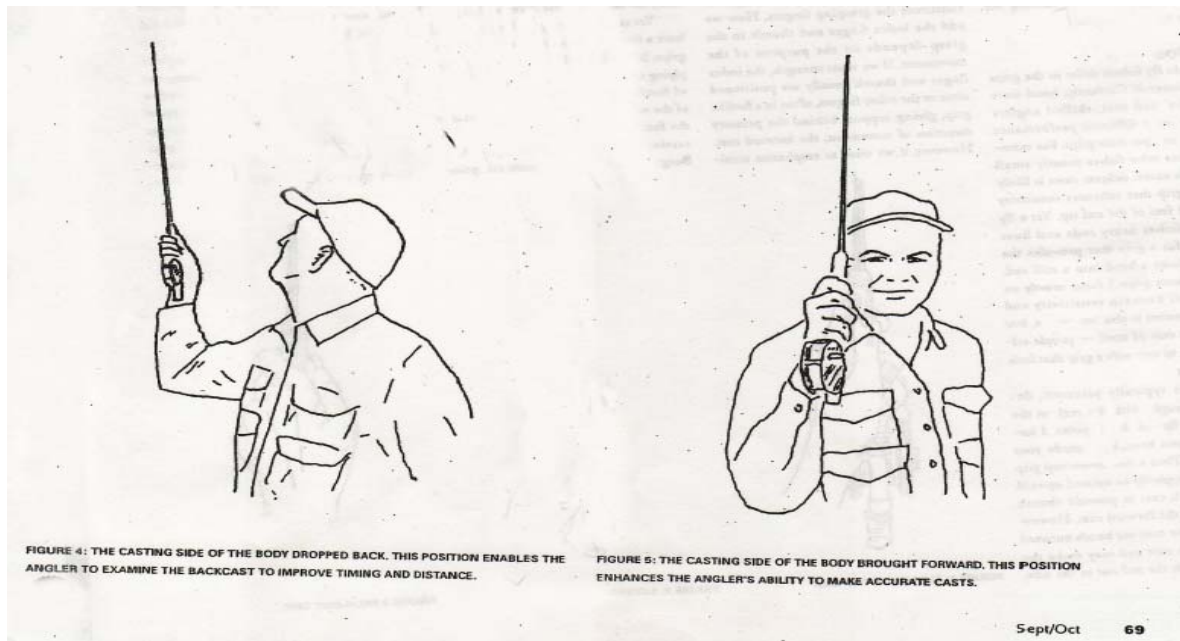
A Stance for Casting

The stance you use for casting can influence the movements that follow, such as how you move your casting arm and add force with your shoulder and body. As with grips, each stance provides somewhat different advantages and disadvantages.

I typically start beginning students with a squared stance, facing the target without dropping either foot back. I consider the primary advantage of this stance to be simplicity in the alignment of the casting arm. Without moving your body, you can easily attain an elbow-forward arm position throughout the casting movements. Such simplification of primary movements is important in achieving the consistency for which we strive.

Some casting instructors start their students with the casting side dropped back. If right-

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handed, you drop your right foot back, as if preparing to throw a ball. Bruce Richards, the noted casting instructor from the Midwest, starts his students with the casting side dropped back 45 degrees. Bruce and I agree that the main advantage of this stance is in developing timing. You are able to watch your back cast to see when to start forward (Figure 4). Yet, I find that starting with the casting side back may lead to rotating that side forward during the forward cast. This additional body turning sometimes rotates a caster's arm and fly rod out of alignment, thus angling the fly line away from the intended direction. Having to realign your arm and rod for the forward cast can also complicate the movement, particularly if using an elbow forward half-throwing motion.

Although timing can be taught in various ways, I believe that most students in fact do learn it best by turning to see the fly line straightening in back, so I invite students with timing problems to do so. However, I have them drop the casting side back just enough to see the back cast, then return them to a squared stance when the

timing has been corrected. Turning to watch a back cast is usually done when practicing, seldom when fishing. Thus, we hear the saying, 'Watching your back cast is bad form, except in grizzly bear country'.

However, I do encourage my students to drop the casting side back when they're ready for distance casting. Watching the loops coming off the rod tip on a back cast is the best way I know to learn how and where to stop the rod butt to form small loops in a long line on the back cast. I am less concerned about arm alignment by this time, because the movements should be fairly well ingrained. This open stance offers another distance advantage, inviting long hand movements. In addition to using this stance for distance casting, Joan Wulff recommends using it and a lengthened hand movement when casting short fly rods or those with slow, full-flexing actions.

Occasionally I see a person with the casting side and foot forward, rather than back. I see this most often in top tournament casters, such as Chris Korich, when they're working on accu

racy. I believe that turning the casting side forward enhances accuracy by bringing the hand and arm that directs the cast into closer alignment with the eyes and the target (Figure 5).

When attempting a pinpoint fishing cast, I sometimes find myself doing this to line up my eyes, hand and point of aim.

In sum, I start students with the grip and stance that I believe work best for most people. If you are a beginner, try the squared stance, with your thumb providing support behind the forward cast. If you find yourself having trouble with timing, drop your casting side back enough to make it easier to watch your back cast. If you are more experienced, I would encourage you to experiment with these grips and stances, considering the trade-offs in each change you make. Perhaps you will find something that works better with your cast than what you have been doing. Experimentation adds to the fun of learning as well as to the art of teaching.